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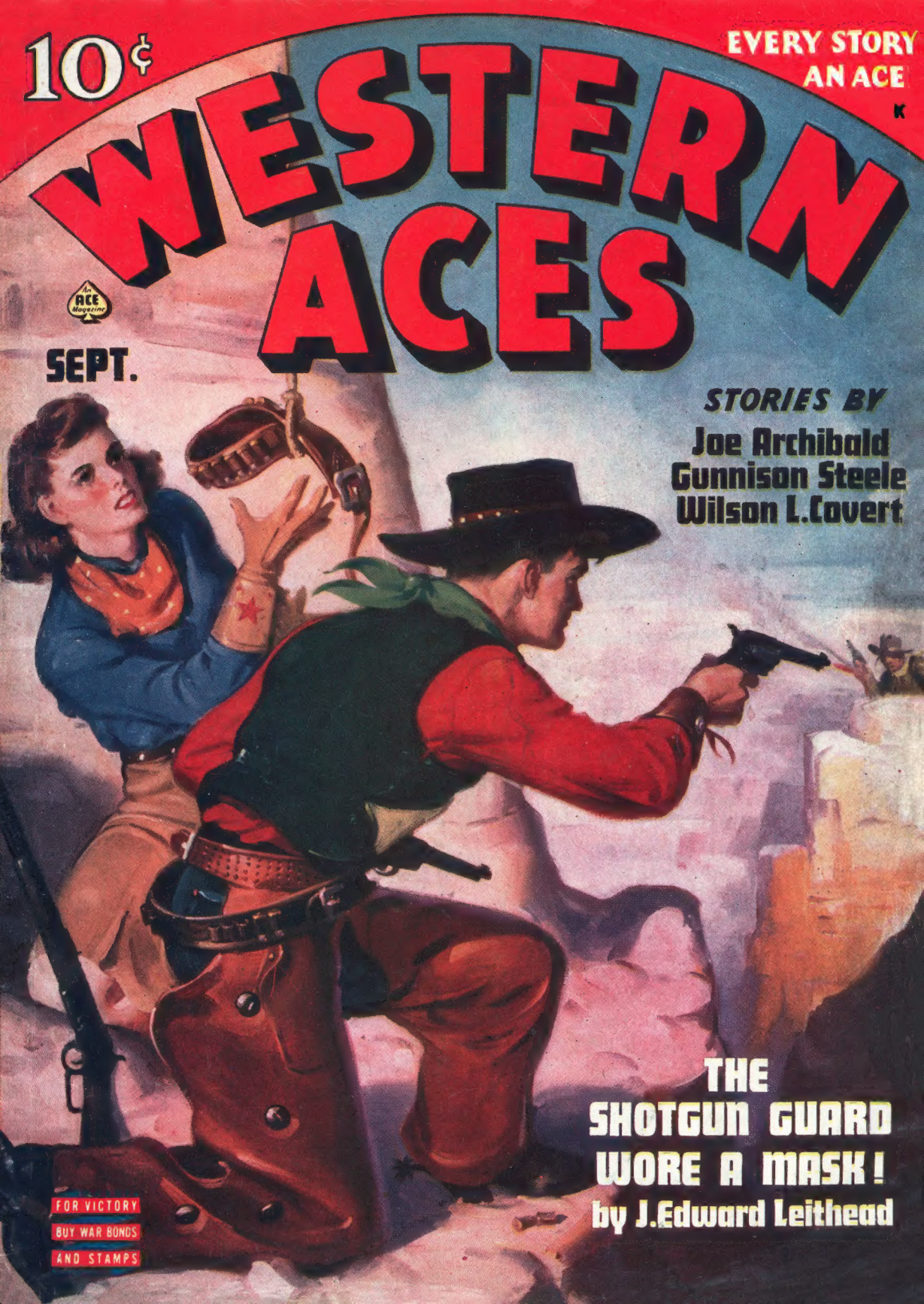

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by J. Edward Leithead

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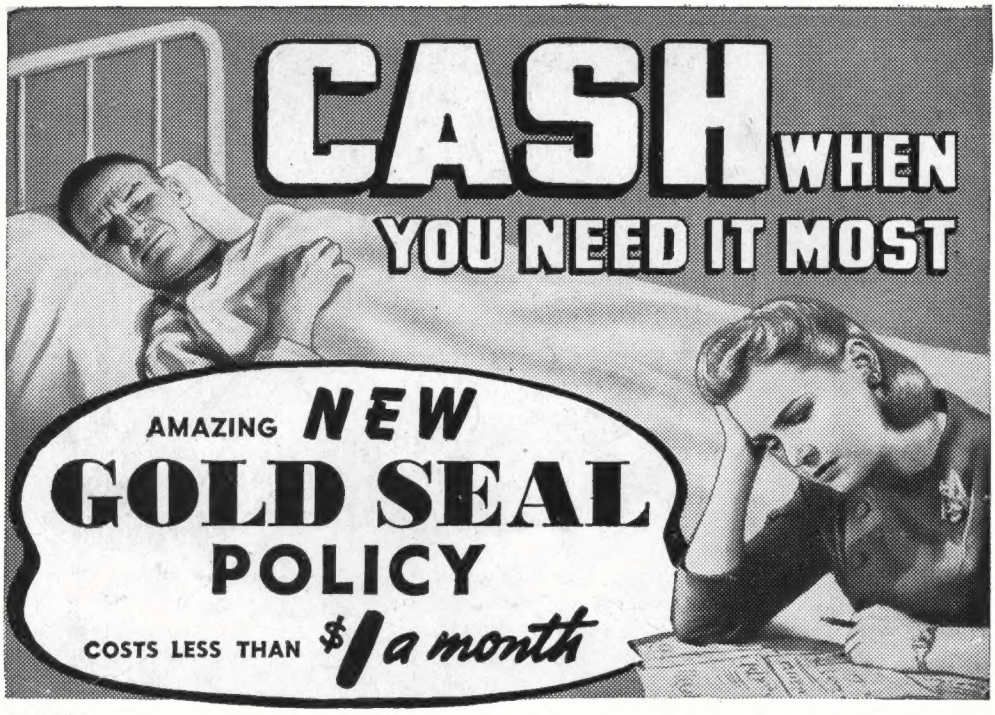


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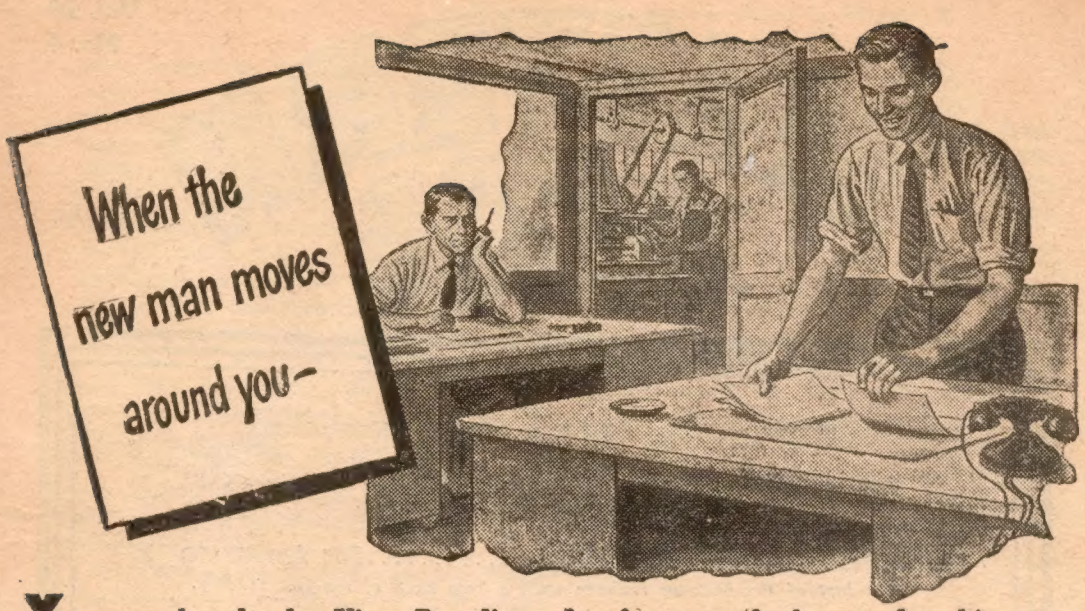


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SEPT. 1944

Vol. 20 No. 4

# WESTERN ACES

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*Cover by George J. Rozen*

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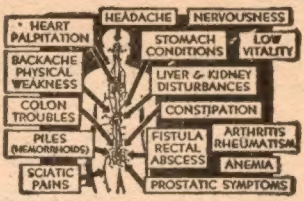


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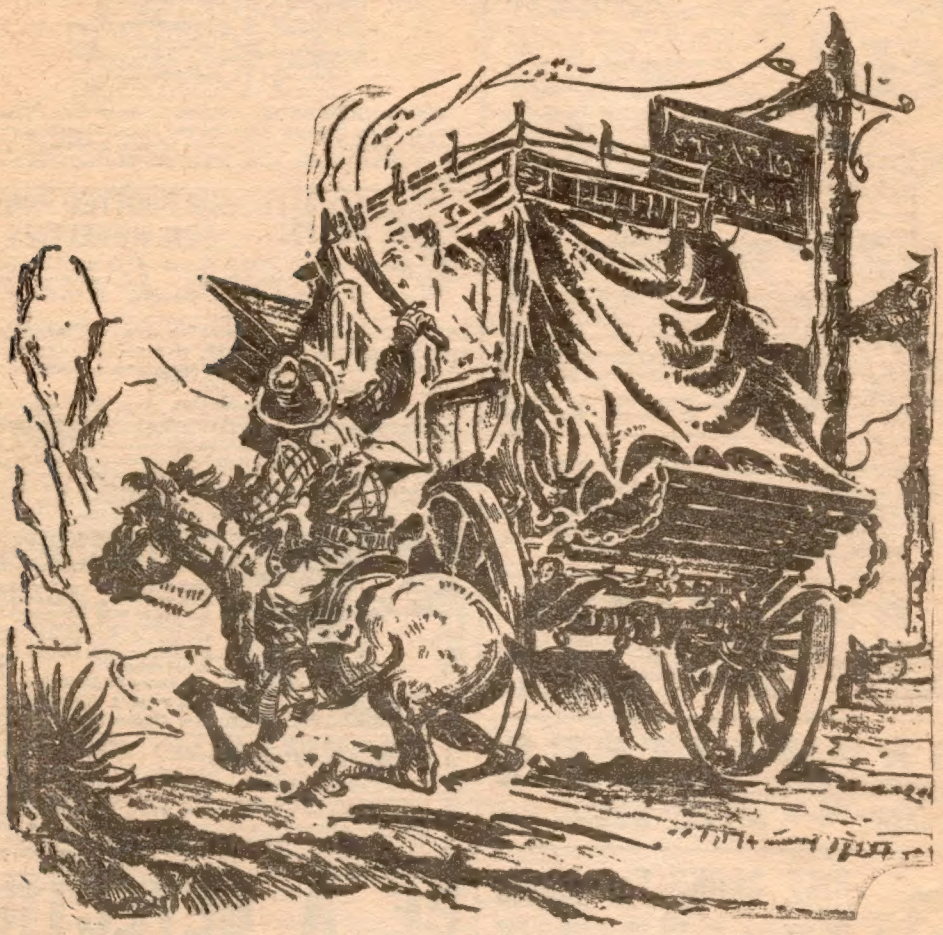

## By J. Edward Leithead

### CHAPTER I

WORMING through brush to the lip of the clay bank, Brett Clanton gazed upon a scene that set his blood rioting. Twenty yards back he had quit his saddle at the sounds of a girl's outcries and the furious barking of dogs. He couldn't see the dogs, probably tied behind the log store in the hollow. But the blonde-haired girl was in plain view, a slender figure in a print dress.

Two hard-faced men were helping her to the back of a horse. She needed help, for her wrists were bound. So were those of a boy, eighteen or nineteen, who sat glowering on a horse nearby. He looked like the girl's brother.

"Why do you want to hang us, Mr. Fanning?" The girl made sobbing appeal to a tall, spade-bearded man wearing broadcloth and a low-crowned hat. "Jody and I didn't take your cattle."

Fanning's voice was singularly bland.

# Wore a Mask!

*When stage agent Brett Clanton saved an outlaw's proteges from hangman's hemp, his trail took him along the longrider line where Colt customers paid their fares with .45's.*

"I never said you did, Cora Dallett. But you both have cast your lot with Whip Kilmer's outlaw gang. And since Kilmer isn't here to answer for his crimes, you must pay the penalty instead. I have hopes it will make him hunt me up in Sandburr for revenge. If he comes, there'll be fifty guns ready to cut him down."

He waved a hand. The men holding the prisoners' horses started leading them toward a widespreading oak. Brett Clanton backed rapidly in the undergrowth, rose and ran to his horse. There were fourteen gun-hung men in that hollow, and he stood no chance of effecting a rescue by Coltwork alone. But the continued barking of the dogs had given him an idea. He rode through the woods until he struck a downgrade. It brought him out on level ground behind the store.

The clamorous dogs were in a stout-wired enclosure, trying to leap the barrier. Brett counted a dozen of them, great Danes, wolfhounds, mastiffs, all savagely eager to get at the trespassers.

"Whip Kilmer must do some wolf huntin'," reflected Clanton, riding up to the pen. "Don't like to sacrifice these fellows, but it'll be in a good cause."

He unhooked the wired gate without dismounting. The great dogs bounded through the opening, several leaping at the stranger on horseback. Brett lashed out with his quirt, shouting, "Go get 'em!" Most of the pack had streaked for the corner of the store. Their wild baying, as they sighted the lynching party, drew Brett's attackers after them. Loping past the store, Clanton narrowly escaped collision with the Fanning saddle horses, stampeded by the pack.

ACROSS the clearing, by the gallows tree, men and dogs were tangling. Brett held his gun at the ready as he headed for the big oak. He was within ten yards of it before Fanning and his men, confused by the attack, started using their guns. A great Dane and a shaggy wolfhound rolled over, kicking in the death throes, as Colts flashed. But there were plenty more of the dogs and they gallantly assailed the dodging men with bared fangs, heedless of popping hardware unless a bullet found its mark.

"Who let that pack loose?" yelled Fanning, fending off a mastiff with his left arm while he tugged at a gun.

Brett sped by him, reined up beneath the tree. Standing in his stirrups, he snatched the noose from the girl's neck, then turned to Jody. He hadn't time to bother with their hands, but swung the horses toward the south side of the depression. His quirt swished. As the animals plunged forward, Brett trailed them, faced back in the saddle.

Half of the dogs were down. The Fanning crowd suddenly realized what was taking place under cover of the canine attack. Pistols that had been decimating the Kilmer pack sprayed lead at the tall stranger with the cold blue eyes. His Colt jetted smoky flame. The howling of bullet-branded men mingled with the howling of the dogs.

When lead began to fall short, Clanton was close to the southern rim of the hollow. For some time he had been aware of the plaint of cattle in the vicinity. Now he spied the corral in which they were penned, half hidden by chaparral. Fanning and his men were running about, recapturing their saddle horses. Three dogs, all that remained, overtook Clanton's party. When Cora Dallett spoke to them by name, they sprang up at her with friendly yelps.

"Sorry so many of the pack was killed, Miss Dallett," said Clanton, "but I didn't see any other way to save you folks. I had to act quick."

"We don't know how to thank you," she said, her cheeks still pale from the ordeal. "It's too bad about the dogs. Are you a friend of Whip Kilmer's? You seem to know us."

Clanton explained that he had been listening in the brush, told his name but not the reason for his being in Winlock Valley. He stopped the horses to free the hands of Cora and her brother, for the Fanning outfit was in the saddle and they had a hard ride ahead of them.

"Any idea where Kilmer is?" asked Brett.

"He left the store with his men two hours ago," replied Cora. "Went this way. If we could find him—"

"Let's try," interposed Brett, with a glance at the horsemen popping out of the hollow.

For half an hour they rode at a hard gallop, keeping just out of gunshot of the Fanning riders. Clanton's horse was tiring, having covered a good stretch of trail since sunup, when a horseback par-

ty rounded a bend in the road southward.

"It's Whip!" shouted Jody.

Six-shooters and saddle guns cleared leather as the big band spurred to meet the Dalletts and their companion. One rider, tall and straight in the saddle, with hawkish features and curly hair reaching to his coat collar, tallied with the description given Brett of Whip Kilmer, boss outlaw. Kilmer reined to a stop, his steely eyes centering for a moment on the pursuers uptrail.

"Fanning, is it?" Kilmer's lips tightened and he shot a look at Cora and Jody. "How'd he find you youngsters?"

Cora answered, "The first we knew they were around was when they rushed into the store. Fanning said he'd trailed cattle from one of his ranches to your corral. Mad at not finding you there, he would've hung the two of us but for Mr. Clanton, here."

Kilmer's gaze lanced through Brett.

"I'll talk to Clanton after we've mixed smoke with Fanning. Wait here, the three of you."

AT THE head of his men, he thundered up the road. Rifles began talking, six-guns joined in the leaden medley. Fanning and his men had pulled up. None of them had Winchesters. After two of their party had been unseated at long range, the rest whirled on the backtrack. The Kilmer gang chased them for half a mile without gaining perceptibly, then wheeled and came back at a choppy run.

"Fanning don't like an open fight unless he's got the odds," Kilmer said grimly, halting beside Clanton and the Dalletts. "He figured on surprisin' us at the store. What I can't savvy is how he tracked them cattle. We've used the store as headquarters for months and nobody's caught on. Where was Holper, Cora, when they rushed you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He was in the store about ten minutes before it happened."

Kilmer's frowning glance went to Clanton. "I don't believe you're a cattle detective workin' for Fanning or you wouldn't have given these protégés of mine a hand. But somebody's been snoopin' round that store and corral, put Fanning wise."

Brett said, "Never heard of him till today. Who is he?"

"The biggest scoundrel unhung!" declared Kilmer. He added with a frosty smile, "Though some opine I'm the biggest. Aubrey Fanning owns the bank in Sandburr and he's reachin' out toward the Winlock range. Lends money to the cattlemen for anything, from makin' repairs to restockin' their brands. When they can't pay, he takes over—cattle, land, everything. If they kick too hard, like, for instance, the father of these Dalletts, Fanning's gunmen step in."

Brett's glance touched Cora and Jody. They were listening with flushed, sorrowful faces.

"Wonderin' how it is they're tied up with me?" asked Kilmer. "Because nobody else seemed to care what became of them. Parents dead, ranch and cattle in Fanning's hands, them two orphans stopped at my store on their way out of the valley. They admitted havin' no place to go. I told 'em they could stay there, for free, long as they had a mind to."

Brett gazed at him curiously. "It's hard to believe you're the same Kilmer the county is offerin' five thousand for, dead or alive."

Kilmer grunted. "It'll be a smart man who'll collect, Clanton. Anyhow, I like young folks. In the month they've been with me, I've come to regard Cora and Jody like they were my own kin."

"What's Fanning want with so many cow outfits?" asked Brett. "Buildin' a cattle empire or somethin'?"

"Partly," answered Whip, "but I've heard he was agitatin' for a railroad. If it came and he owned most of the land it crossed, he'd be the richest man in the state."

Clanton said, "There's likely to be stage service through this country before there's any railroad, if plans work out. Ever hear of the Longbow Line?"

Kilmer nodded. "You in that business?"

"Driver on the line. Ward Hargis, my boss, and the Teton Express Company, which has contracts to let, want to extend the line five hundred miles west. I've been promised the job of division agent. One thing makes Hargis hesitate to risk his money."

Kilmer's lips twitched. "What's that?"

"I think you know, Kilmer. He's afraid your gang, which has escaped the manhunters of two counties, will plunder the Longbow coaches and leave him out on a limb."

"I know somethin' else, too," said

Whip. "He sent you to scout round and try'n put us out of business."

Brett met the outlaw's probing look gamely. "That's right. For two weeks I've been searchin' for your hideout."

AN ANGRY muttering ran through the listening longriders. Whip spoke, a sardonic glint in his eyes: "Now that we're face to face, how do you figure your chances of layin' the Kilmer gang by the heels?"

"Poor, right now," admitted Brett. "And I didn't expect to find Whip Kilmer befriendin' a couple of orphans. You ought to be in better business."

"It's years to late to talk about that," returned the outlaw. "Clanton, the Dalletts and me are in your debt. I'll made a bargain with you."

"Well?" said Brett cautiously.

"Cora and Jody," continued Kilmer, "need a better protector than a bandit with a price on his head. They ought to live in a more civilized place, safe from men like Fanning. If I agree to let the Longbow coaches plumb alone, will you take the kids back east and see to it they get a new start?"

Brett thought awhile before answering. "I don't know what Hargis would think of the proposition, Kilmer, but it's a fact I'd dislike to throw a gun on you now if I had the chance. Union City, the eastern terminal of the Longbow Line, is a big town. Cora and her brother could find work there. But stagecoaches carryin' valuable express are a big temptation to men like you."

"Sure," Whip said, "but we've made a good livin' without 'em, picking on Fanning chiefly. We've robbed his Sandburr bank twice, rustled cattle from him by the hundreds. Never bother the small fry that can't afford to lose. You have my solemn word the Longbow coaches won't be stopped by the Kilmer outfit."

"Whip's been awfully kind to us," Cora spoke up, "but I would like to live in a big town, earn my own living. And Jody—"

"I'd like to ride with Whip," Jody broke in. "Someday maybe I'd get a crack at old Fanning, on Dad's account."

"You go with your sister and Clanton, kid," said Whip.

Brett pushed back his Stetson to scratch his head. "Hargis and the Teton Express people may not want to gamble with you roamin' the country, Kilmer, but I'll make my report."

"I've never broken my word to any man yet," declared Whip. "I'm glad to get it settled about the Dalletts. Let's get back to the store. We can't use the place any more, but if Fanning ain't burned it, there's a few belongings Cora and Jody will want to take with them."

Wary of ambush along the trail, the party returned to the hollow. The log building stood untouched by the firebrand, but Fanning had removed his cattle from the corral. As Whip dismounted in front of the store, a man slid down the north bank of the depression and shambled toward them. He was rawboned and bushy-whiskered, with ferrety eyes.

Kilmer faced him angrily. "I left you in charge of the store, Holper. Where were you when Fanning dropped in?"

"Boss," replied Holper, "I seen 'em comin'. There was so many in the gang I knowed I hadn't no chance, and I took to the woods."

"Leavin' the Dalletts," roared Kilmer, "to the mercy of Fanning! They near got hung because you turned yellow!"

"But, boss," protested Holper, "I couldn't 'a' done a thing. They'd have killed me—"

Kilmer's fist lashed out and Holper crumpled.

"Maybe that'll learn you," gritted Whip, "not to desert when the goin' is tough! I don't want cowards in my outfit!"

## CHAPTER II

WARD HARGIS, energetic, short-tempered owner of the Longbow Stage Line was surprised when Brett Clanton appeared at company headquarters with Cora and Jody Dallett. He was even more surprised when he learned the result of Clanton's outlaw hunt.

"What's the word of an outlaw worth? Just exactly nothin'!" The stage line boss snapped his fingers. "I ain't in the habit of drivin' bargains with outlaws, anyhow."

"I knew you wouldn't like it," said Brett. "But I'd sooner trust Kilmer than I would Aubrey Fanning, who's supposed to be on the right side of the law. Pay me off and I'll go to punchin' cattle."

"No, no," Hargis said, less testily. "Probably did the best you could. We'll

go ahead if the Teton Express Company's willin'. And if Kilmer don't lay off us, we'll gun for him."

Within a week, men were at work building new stations and corrals over a route extending to the western limit of the state. Division headquarters was established in Sandburr, because it was centrally located. When the first coach rolled westward, Clanton, as division agent, took up quarters in the little office beside the Sandburr stage barn. Cora Dallett had secured a job as waitress in a Union City restaurant. Jody, who had broken horses on his father's ranch, had learned to drive a six-in-hand under Brett's tutelage and was assigned to a coach on the Longbow Line.

At noon, on his first day in Sandburr, Clanton left the office for a nearby eating house. As he approached Fanning's red brick bank, a stringy oldster in range clothes backed onto the sidewalk, hollering at the banker, who had followed him to the door.

"No reason you can't extend my mortgage till fall, when the cattle market's good—no reason except you want the Triangle land!"

"I didn't ask you to borrow my money, Burrows," retorted Fanning. "You'll have have the full amount in three weeks or Sheriff Agnew will serve an eviction notice."

"Backed up by your gunslingers!" Seth Burrows, of the Triangle ranch, slapped holstered six-shooter. "They'll have a smoky time throwin' me out. I've some tough fighters on my spread. We won't play meek and we won't get shot where our suspenders cross!"

Clanton half expected the enraged rancher to throw down on Fanning, but Burrows topped a horse at the rack and rode off cursing. The banker, about to turn indoors, caught sight of Brett and came out on the sidewalk, eyeing him sharply.

"Aren't you with this Longbow outfit?" asked Fanning.

"Yes. I'm Clanton, the division agent."

The banker's cold eyes narrowed. "A railroad is what this country needs, not a stage line, which isn't a permanent means of transportation. I wish the owner no hard luck, but I fear it will be a profitless venture with outlaws like Whip Kilmer ready to take toll of every coach. You've heard of Whip?"

"Yes," said Brett.

"I know—" Fanning's eyes lighted up —"I know where I've seen you before! You're the man who loosed those dogs on us the day we located Kilmer's hideout. Is it possible you're one of that gang, brazenly working for the stage company? I'll have Sheriff Agnew look into the matter."

NOT having met the sheriff, Brett wasn't sure but that he was a tool of Fanning's. His answer cracked out: "Let him check on me. I'm no bandit. You should be the last one to put up a holler about lawbreakin'. Any lynchin' is bad enough, but I haven't a name for the man who would try to hang a defenseless girl and her kid brother. I was glad I happened to be around."

The banker said harshly, "The Dalletts were hiding with those outlaws."

"Hidin' ain't the word," retorted Brett. "I heard the Dalletts' story."

"I guess we don't see eye to eye on that, Clanton," Fanning grated. Turning abruptly, he re-entered the bank.

That evening the westbound stage pulled up at the barn with a flourish and young Jody Dallett descended proudly over the front wheel. He was making his first run. While the hostlers unhooked the foam-spattered six-in-hand, Brett came from the office to greet Jody.

"No trouble on the way," said Clanton. "You've got a full express box."

"None," grinned Jody. "If you're thinkin' Whip will bother us, you're wrong."

"No, I don't really think he will. How's Cora?"

"Fine. Sent her regards."

Brett's face glowed, for the girl had been much in his thoughts. "I have some express packages, Jody. Get 'em for you while they're changin' horses."

The passengers had alighted to stretch, wandering along the sidewalk. Clanton wasn't absent five minutes, but when he returned, Jody was struggling in the grip of two agate-eyed ruffians. Another had snaked the boy's gun from his belt. There were five in the gang, and Brett instantly recognized them as members of that lynching party.

"Hold still, you little skunk, or I'll break your arm!" snarled one of Jody's captors. "What business you got drivin' stage?"

Clanton dropped his packages with a thud that drew attention to him.

"Turn the kid loose!" barked the division agent, resting hand on gunstock.

"He's the whelp that holed up with Kilmer," snapped back a bulky gunman. "Likely knows where the gang has its new headquarters. I betcha we find out before we're through with him."

"Turn him loose!" Brett repeated. "I won't tell you again!"

"Want to make smoke, do you?" The big pistoleer looked unwieldy, but there was nothing slow about his draw.

Brett, on occasion, was a hip-shooter. The bottom of his holster was cut away for that purpose. Turned sideways, he tilted gun in scabbard, drilled the big man above his crossed belts while two Colts unraveled muzzle fire. At five paces, Brett's lead slammed the pistoleer back on his heels. Brett felt a bullet brush his gun-arm. He put a second slug through the gunman's neck as he swayed forward.

Over the sinking form, Clanton centered hot lead on a crouching killer, whose hands flew up, releasing smoking .45's. Jody's captors had let him go to mix in the powder fracas. The boy tripped one and sprang aside, narrowly escaping a shot from the fellow's sluing gun.

Clanton, still presenting a sidelong target for blazing sixes, kept his Colt talking through the bottomless holster, slanting it left and right. Two trigger-twitchers sprawled down a yard apart, but one rose again. His sweaty face, the eyes bulging, blood gushing from open mouth, was turned to Clanton in the light of the office window. He fired as he fled, lifting his feet high at every step. Brett pivoted and flame spat from the exposed Colt muzzle. The gunman reached the sidewalk, wobbled along it for several paces. Then suddenly he fell and lay motionless.

CLANTON faced the spot where the gunman tripped by Jody had been lying. He was no longer there. Young Dallett was pawing around in search of the Colt they had taken from him. He found it and jumped up, looking down the street to see if the last gunman was still in range.

"Never mind him, Jody," said Clanton. "Get back on the box."

The hostlers had been holding the reins in the barn until the shooting stopped. Now they led the six horses down the ramp to the waiting coach. Clanton recalled the frightened passengers with the shout, "All aboard!" He wanted to get Jody out of Sandburr before there was more trouble. But a star-toting man, wearing a big white hat, bustled up as the last tug was hooked.

"What's the ruckus?" demanded Sheriff Lin Agnew. "Somebody told me that Fanning's men jumped a stage driver and you horned in."

"I would, naturally," replied Brett. "I reckon you know Jody Dallett."

Agnew glanced at the youth on the box. "So you're the driver, eh? Where you been keepin' yourself?"

"We're a little behind schedule, sheriff," said Clanton. "Mind if he starts? I'll explain everything."

As the Concord rocked away, Brett drew the lawman into the stage office. Agnew proved a good listener. He bit the end from the cigar Brett handed him and lighted it before speaking.

"You did right, Clanton. Just because Jody stayed a month with Kilmer it don't make him an outlaw. Fanning never told me about that necktie party. Between you and me and the hitchrack, I don't like Aubrey's business methods. Some day I may get somethin' on him, but it'll have to be airtight."

Brett held out his hand. "I'm glad to find you don't wear Fanning's collar, sheriff."

Expecting Whip Kilmer to launch a series of holdings that would cause the Longbow Stage Line to bog down, Aubrey Fanning became restive as days went by and no trouble on the road was reported. One night, seated in his living quarters over the bank, Fanning heard a rap on the outer door. He opened it cautiously. Holper, the runaway of Kilmer's gang, slouched into the room.

"It's about time you showed up," the banker greeted him half angrily. "What's the matter with Kilmer that he doesn't raid the stage line? Instead, he's been stealing my cattle again."

Holper sank into a chair. "We've been on the move ever since quittin' the store. Right now we have no reg'lar hidin' place or I'd 'a' let you know. I don't rightly know Whip's reason, but he says we're leavin' the stages alone. Fact is, I think they distrust me since I run out on the Dalletts."

"That raid miscarried," said Fanning, "because Kilmer's longriders weren't at home. It's my opinion, Holper, that Clanton's made some sort of deal with Whip, giving immunity to the Longbow. That line must be wrecked, for its success would delay the building of a railway. If Kilmer isn't going to plunder the stages, I'll have to work out a plan of my own. And I want that gang wiped out. They're a constant drain on my resources. Here's what you're to do."

Holper, as he listened, nervously twisted his battered hat. He nodded and rose to go.

"Reckon it's the only way they'll be got dead to rights, Mr. Fanning. I sure hope Whip don't suspect a trick and plug me."

THREE evenings later, Brett Clanton left the stage and express office and had taken a dozen steps along the board sidewalk when he heard his name guardedly spoken. He turned swiftly, gun-hand dropping. Seven or eight men were grouped in the shadow of the stage barn.

"Easy, Brett," the voice went on. "It's Whip."

Clanton relaxed and stepped up to them. "Not raidin' the town, are you?"

"You don't have to worry, long as we let the coaches be," retorted Kilmer. "So you're not in jail, in danger of bein' lynched, eh? And Jody ain't, either?"

"Why, no," said Brett. "What gave you that idea?"

Kilmer swore. "Holper, the traitor! He said you and Jody had been arrested, charged with belongin' to my gang, and you'd be dead ones if we didn't ride in and take the jail apart. Holper's undercover man for Fanning, that's what he is! Only been with us a short time. It was him told Fanning the store was our headquarters. Not bein' sure he was tellin' the truth, I came in to check up, leavin' most of the boys outside."

"It's a trap, Whip," declared Clanton. "They were careful not to let me get wind of it. Where's Holper now?"

"Rode in with us," gritted the outlaw, "pretendin' he'd scout round and see if the jail was guarded. But I know where he went—to Fanning's bank, to let him know we're here! Boys, we're gettin' that traitor before we leave!"

"You'd be wiser to slip out quietly, Whip," said Clanton.

"Maybe," Kilmer admitted. "But that coyote would never come in range again, knowin' we're onto him."

He glided away with a soft chink of spurs, followed by his men. Their horses must have been close by, for presently the eight rode past the Longbow headquarters. Clanton expected shots to blaze at them any instant, but the little troop kept on until opposite the red brick bank.

Standing at the edge of the sidewalk, Brett could see the outside stairway leading to Fanning's rooms on the second floor. The window blinds were drawn, but an oblong of light showed briefly at the upper landing as the door opened and closed. Whip called out, and a gun blazed on the stairway. Several guns answered from the street. Clanton heard a body roll down the steps. Holper had paid for his treachery.

As the outlaws spurred away from the bank, the second story windows went up with a bang. The light in the front room had been extinguished, but the glare of burning powder illumined the two apertures in a steady stream. Fanning gunmen, and possibly Sheriff Agnew himself, were behind those shooting-irons. And they weren't wasting lead. Two horses nose-dived, throwing their riders, who scrambled up and ran on, fogging Colts.

From three places across the street, rifles and six-guns tuned up, piling other horses in the dust. Only three outlaws were now mounted, and as they checked rein to pick up unhorsed comrades, a burst of gunfire from a new quarter accounted for the remaining broncs.

A couple of bandits had fallen, riddled, but six of them, springing to the sidewalk, pelted onward. Brett backed up to the stage barn to be out of the way. He made out Whip in the lead, running awkwardly in his high-heeled cowboy boots. An outlaw behind him suddenly shouted:

"The stage barn, fellows! We can get horses there!"

Brett knew that the hostlers were all at a saloon in the next block. He turned swiftly to close the doors, but a shot from the gang brought him face about. It wasn't Whip who had fired, but the man at his heels.

"Sheer off, Whip!" warned Brett. "You can't take the company horses!"

Kilmer's gun sagged down. He looke

at Clanton grimly, breathing hard. The rest of the gang, coming up on the run, were less hesitant.

"We're gettin' broncs," one roared, "if we have to kill you!"

A bullet cut a piece from Brett's Stetson brim. Another nipped his shoulder. All but Kilmer were crowding in on him. Clanton tipped up his holster, let drive into the barrel-like chest of the nearest bandit. The other four spread fanwise, thumbing hammers. Shooting for his life, Brett knocked down a second outlaw, staggered a third with slashing lead.

Then outlaw guns belched a volley. Before the simultaneous discharge blinded him, Brett saw the man he had last tallied clap both hands to his middle as if to cover a gaping bullet-hole. The stage agent slipped down and knew nothing of the rush of men into the barn.

He lay there still when Kilmer and two survivors plunged out again, riding three stage horses slick, but with halters to guide the animals. Even the rising thunder of guns and horses' hoofs, as the Kilmer men on the outskirts charged in to help the getaway, failed to arouse Clanton.

## CHAPTER III

WHEN the outlaws had gone, shooting their way to the open plain, Sheriff Agnew and Aubrey Fanning came to stand beside the limp form of the stage agent.

"Looks like a gone beaver," Agnew remarked, dropping to his knees. "No, his heart's beatin'."

"Better if it wasn't," Fanning said harshly. "I told you he was connected with that gang. He let them ride away on stage horses."

Sheriff Agnew snorted. "You must be blind, man! Look there, and there! He downed three, tryin' to keep 'em out of the barn. And he's all shot up himself. Does that look like he was friendly to Kilmer's longriders?"

Brett wasn't as near death as first appeared. While he was laid up at division headquarters, disturbing reports reached him of holdups on the line, of thefts of horses from the stage corrals, the burn-, of a station or two. Some outfit had mmenced systematically to plunder the ongbow. Clanton had reason to believe was Whip Kilmer's gang. Angered that Brett had opposed their taking company horses and drilled three of his men, Whip had apparently turned hostile to the stage line. He probably thought Clanton was dead, anyhow.

By the time Brett was hobbling about, a stage from the east brought Detective Magee, of the Teton Express Company, to investigate the robberies. Hargis had told him of the agreement with Kilmer.

"You can't trust these outlaws, Clanton," asserted Magee. "Got any notion where he holes up?"

"No," said Brett, "but the minute I'm able to sit a horse I'll be lookin' for him."

Magee went west with the next stage to conduct a search of his own. The news that twelve more horses had been run off from a stock corral sent Brett into the saddle two days later. He passed through one of the torched stations, temporarily abandoned, arrived on the scene of the latest raid in the afternoon. The stock-tender showed him the empty corral and tracks leading north. The trail ended on the bank of the adjacent creek.

Clanton rode on to the next station, getting there just as darkness fell. The stock-tender was preparing supper for himself and Jody Darlett. The young driver's left arm was bandaged.

"Holdup?" asked Brett, surprised to find the boy there.

"Uh-huh." Jody eyed him a moment. "Don't be blamin' Whip, though. Even if you did have a fight with his outfit, this is some other gang."

That night, after the station lights had been turned out, the pounding of hoofs brought the three tumbling from their bunks. No stagecoach was due from east or west until the following morning. Brett, throwing gunbelt around his waist, went to the east window and peered out. Five horsemen were coming up the trail. Jody nudged Clanton.

"Before you shoot, let me try somethin'."

Brett stepped aside and Jody called from the window, ready to duck if he got the wrong kind of answer.

"That you, Whip? This is Jody Dallett."

The night riders were pulling up at the corral gate. A Colt gave voice and a bullet grooved the window frame.

Jody crouched down, exclaiming,

"Ain't that proof it's not the Kilmer gang!"

Clanton wasn't wholly convinced. Whip would never harm the boy, but if he were not with this detachment, his men might treat young Dallett like any other stage line employee.

OTHER bullets followed the first, droning through the window, chunking into the outer wall. At a lull in the firing, Brett reared up and sledged a raider out of the saddle. Shooting at his elbow, Simms, the stock-tender, nicked another. Then Simms backed away with a grunt of pain.

"Took a piece of my ear," he answered Brett's sharp query.

"You and Jody hold the window," Clanton ordered as he reloaded. "I'll flank 'em before they let the horses out."

He crossed to the door, unbolted it. Stealing to the corner of the station, he saw one outlaw was off his horse, dropping the corral bars. Three others, mounted, were churning lead at the smoke-wreathed window. Brett raised his gun on a thickset rider. Knocked forward by the .45 slug, the latter wrapped arms about his horse's neck to keep from falling. The man on the ground whirled, Colt flaming.

A bullet chipped the log above Clanton's head. His return shot rocked the outlaw, who vanished behind a gun-wielding mate and next appeared astride his horse, clattering for the road. Simms and Jody were pouring lead recklessly from the side window as Brett drew the gang's fire.

The stage trail echoed to retreating hoofbeats. As they fled, Clanton observed a pair of legs dangling beside the left boot of an upright rider. Doubtless the outlaw he had killed as the fight opened. The raiders weren't leaving dead men around to be identified.

In the morning, Brett and Jody hit leather for Sandburr. Night was closing in again as they neared town, and an ominous glow in the sky caused them to spur the jaded horses. They found Sandburr in an uproar, Longbow Stage headquarters ablaze.

Swinging from saddles, Clanton and young Dallett joined Sandburr's volunteer fire company. All the horses had been run out of the barn, but the rest of the Longbow property was doomed. The efforts of the fire fighters were directed toward halting the spread of the conflagration. Stage office and barn were crumbling in red-hot ruin when the westbound coach rolled up the middle of the street. At sight of the two passengers who alighted, Brett and Jody converged on the stage.

Ward Hargis trembled with rage as he pointed. "First it's holdups, then horse stealin' and stations burned. Now division headquarters is wiped out! Clanton, what's the matter that you can't stop it?"

Beside the stage boss stood Cora Dallett, her face strained in the reflected glow of the burning wreckage. She tried to smile at Brett and Jody.

"Ever since hearing you were hurt, Brett," she said. "I've been trying to get a few days off to come out. I guess I didn't pick a very good time."

"Answer me, Clanton," stormed Hargis. "If you know who's tryin' to wreck us, spit it out!"

"It's certain, Mr. Hargis," said Brett, "that somebody is makin' undercover war—"

The voice of Aubrey Fanning interrupted, addressing Hargis: "I believe you're the owner of the Longbow Line? I'm Fanning, the banker. I was waiting to hear your agent name the Kilmer gang as the raiders, but he doesn't seem in any hurry to do it. I suppose you have complete confidence in this Clanton?"

"Why not?" retorted Hargis. "He's worked for me a long time."

THE banker glanced malevolently at grim-faced Brett. "There's such a thing as trusting even an old employee too far. I have positive knowledge that Clanton visited Whip Kilmer before the line was extended west. For a long while your stages weren't molested. I say apparently because I think looting was going on quietly, that Clanton and Kilmer divided the spoils.

"Then a while back, right here town, they had a falling out. And Kilm seems to have begun an open campai of pillage. I can swear three of Ki' men were around just before the fi. noticed."

Brett itched to ram the false cha down his accuser's throat. But a sault on the banker wouldn't he case. "Mr. Hargis—" he began.

"Shut up!" rapped Hargis. "I

talkin'." He wasn't admitting before Fanning and the crowd that he knew of any bargain with Kilmer, but it infuriated him to think that Brett possibly had deceived him about the real terms of the agreement. "There's somethin' dead wrong with the way this line's bein' run. Either the job's too big for you, Clanton, or you've turned crook. I'm not sure which, but you're through as agent!"

A hot retort leaped to Brett's lips, but he realized that Hargis, facing ruin if the depredations continued, was in such a confused state he didn't know what to believe.

"All right, I'm fired," Clanton said quietly, "but I won't quit the raiders' trail till I've run 'em down and proved I've always shot square with you."

"You're givin' Brett a raw deal, Mr. Hargis!" Jody asserted vehemently.

"You're fired, too!" snapped Hargis.

Cora said indignantly, "I used to think you were nice, Mr. Hargis, but you're just a horrid, suspicious old man!"

"Jody," said Brett, "get our horses."

The boy went off and returned with the mounts.

"We may be a long time on the trail, Cora," Brett told her. "Better take the next stage east to Union City."

"I'm not going back," she stated firmly. "I'm going with you and Jody."

Clanton, perceiving it would be useless to argue, pulled his horse forward. "Step up, then. I'll ride behind."

Cora mounted with the easy grace of a ranch-bred girl.

Aubrey Fanning said sharply:

"Hold on, now! It isn't good sense to let you three ride off to join Whip Kilmer and make us more trouble. Carver, relieve Clanton and Dallett of their guns!"

Carver, chief of Fanning's Coltmen, wly detached himself from the crowd. ett, standing by his horse, struck up holster so that the half-leathered ooter covered Carver.

d can't have my gun, Carver," said incisively, "but I'll give you a et if you take another step!"

riff Lin Agnew, who had joined the ing unnoticed, now forged to the "Get on your horse, Clanton. I'll r Carver. There's no reason to detain you and the Dalletts. I'm tired of seein' you folks put on."

Brett mounted, and Cora turned the double-burdened horse.

## CHAPTER IV

SUNRISE found the three following the stage route westward. If Whip Kilmer was raiding the Longbow, there was a possibility they'd meet up with him cruising along the line. And Brett wanted to settle that question before baiting a trap for Fanning's men. It was one gang or the other.

A thorough-braced Concord whirled down the road from the west, bounced over a deep rut and slowed as Clanton and the Dalletts pulled up at the trailside. Detective Magee sprang from the coach while the express manager was telling Brett of another holdup.

Magee broke in: "There was four of the bandits, Clanton. We had no chance to shoot. After they got the strongbox and rode away, Dolan and I unhitched the leaders to trail them. It was about three o'clock, pretty dark, but we kept the gang in sight. They veered off toward a ranch that Dolan says belongs to Seth Burrows. We thought they'd stopped at the ranch, but they showed up on the other side. We overhauled the four who hadn't been shootin' any. They put their hands up quick."

"But," said Dolan, the messenger, "they had no express box, no money in their saddlebags, and swore up and down they hadn't held us up."

"Recognize them?" asked Brett eagerly.

"Sure did," replied the shotgun man. "Four hard-cases that work for Fanning. Made an awful holler about what Fanning'd do when Magee talked of arrestin' them on suspicion."

"Knew I couldn't held them without some sort of evidence," said the express company detective. "Dolan and I rode back, lookin' for that box, but couldn't find it. Anyhow, I've got somethin' to work on. It looks like Fanning's men, not Kilmer's, are the stage robbers."

Brett nodded. It seemed to him that Magee and Dolan had overlooked a bet in searching for the strongbox. "See you later, boys," he said, and swung up behind Cora Dallett.

The stage rolled east, and Clanton told

his companions their next stop was Burrows' Triangle ranch. Several miles west they turned off the stage road. As they topped a steep-side ridge, Jody let out a shrill yell.

"Whip Kilmer! Hey, Whip!"

He rode at breakneck pace to the foot of the ridge. Ten riders, crossing the sagebrush plain, had checked rein at Jody's shout, and Brett easily recognized the tall, straight figure of Kilmer. Jody was talking animatedly to him as Brett and Cora drew near. The outlaw looked around and Brett tensed, not sure how he would be greeted.

"Hadn't expected to lay eyes on any of you again," said Whip. "Jody tells me you've both been fired off the line, Brett. How's that?"

He appeared as friendly as ever. Clanton slid down and stood at Kilmer's stirrup while he explained.

"Did you have the notion we were lootin' the line?" asked the outlaw.

"Yes," said Brett, "though Jody insisted I was wrong."

"I know why you thought I'd broken my word," Whip said. "I was a little hot that night over your refusin' to let us take stage horses. But I don't hold it against you now. Fanning was already suspicious of you, and you did right to protect company property. And you didn't shoot till you had to. What convinced you Fanning's the raider?"

Brett told him about meeting the looted stagecoach.

"That old buzzard," declared Whip, "not only wants to knock out the stage line so he can sell a right of way across his land to a railroad—but his cash is gettin' low! I've been pickin' him clean. He's got money from these holdups cached some place. Where you headin', Brett?"

"Burrows' ranch. I've an idea the stage robbers, hard pressed, hid the box somewhere at the Triangle, meanin' to come back after it. They didn't drop it along the road, anyhow."

Kilmer grinned. "I'd 'a' worked that trick myself. Heard Burrows was havin' mortgage trouble with Fanning. If Seth needs dinero bad and finds that money first, he may not want to give it up. We'll ride along, Brett, and make sure you get the box. It's time Fanning was tripped up."

Within the hour the Triangle buildings appeared on a rise of ground sloping gently down to Stony Creek. A wooden bridge spanned the stream. The cavalcade started across, noting nothing wrong until, with an ominous cracking sound, the floor timbers began to give way.

Brett and Cora were riding beside Whip when the planks dipped suddenly under the horses' feet. Plunging twenty feet to the water below, Brett dragged the girl from the saddle on the upstream side, clear of the kicking horse. Kilmer and his bronc plummeted down a yard or two away. That section of the creek was alive with struggling men and mounts and floating planks.

"Jody!" cried Cora suddenly. "He'll be drowned! I can swim, Brett—let me go."

BOTH struck out for the helplessly bobbing form, but Brett reached Jody first, seized him by the hair as he was going under. He had a gash on his head where he'd evidently been hit by a piece of timber. At the height of the confusion, someone crackled from the north bank.

"Ketched us a mess of fish we didn't expect. I know you, Kilmer. Come ashore and take notice you're covered!"

Brett, towing Jody bankward, saw Burrows and a bunch of cowhands awaiting them with six-guns and rifles.

Whip shouted angrily: "Did you tamper with that bridge, you old bobcat?"

"Sawed the floor planks half through," Burrows hollered back. "It was a trap for Sheriff Agnew and Fanning. Been lookin' for 'em to come any day to chase me off my land. But I'd just as leave trap you fellers, by grab! Kilmer gang is worth a pile of money, dead or alive!"

Brett, half carrying Jody, was first to emerge from the creek. Right behind him were Cora and Whip, the outlaw's hands raised to shoulder level. A Triangle puncher stepped up to yank his guns from soggy holsters.

"See here, Burrows," snapped Kilmer "we've never done you an injury, stole any of your cattle!"

"No matter," returned Seth. "By collectin' the reward for your wild bunch I'll be able to get Fanning out of my hair." He stared at the other three bedraggled figures. "The Dallets, huh? And Clanton, the stage agent!"

"Yes," said Brett, "and we won't bring a cent of blood money."

"I dunno 'bout that!" Seth reached for Brett's gun and stuck it in his trousers band. "Don't look good for a stage company man to be ridin' with bandits."

"Wait'll you hear," said Clanton. "I'm huntin' an express box taken in a holdup last night. The robbers headed for your ranch. I happen to know they weren't any of your men, but I think they hid the box on your premises."

Seth blinked at him. "Express box! I was waked up early this mornin' by hoofbeats in the yard. Thought it was some of my boys back from night herdin'."

"When we get to the ranch," said Clanton, "let's look around. Kilmer's helpin' me gather evidence against Fanning, to put him where he belongs."

Kilmer's men had straggled in, to be relieved of their hardware the minute they set foot on dry land. The horses had scrambled out of the creek. Securing ropes from the saddles, the Triangle cowboys tied the hands of everyone in the party except Clanton. Burrows poked Brett ahead of him, leading the march upslope to the ranch house. A stockhand drove along the horses.

"Line 'em up there on the porch," Burrows ordered his cowpunchers in charge of the prisoners. "Two of you come with me and Clanton. Where—" he turned to Brett—"do you figure them robbers might've cached that box? All my boys was on the range last night."

"It's possible Fanning's men knew that, Burrows. Let's try the barn first."

Brett scanned the ground as they approached the barn, pointed to hoofprints not many hours old. Seth swung open the double doors. Clanton and the rifle-toting cowboys followed him in, looked eagerly about. The stage robbers hadn't much time to hide their plunder with Magee and the express messenger hotly pursuing. The searchers poked here and there without success. Suddenly Brett, kicking a pile of straw in an empty stall, stubbed his toe against something concealed by the grain stalks. In triumph he dragged out the Teton Express strongbox.

"What do you know!" exclaimed Burrows.

"They'd needed crowbar and sledge hammer to open it," remarked Clanton. "When I reach town with this, Burrows, your worries about Fanning ought to be over. He'll go to jail—"

"Not so fast, now," Seth broke in. "Fanning might slide out of it. I've got the Kilmer gang hard and fast, and I'm sure of the reward money to pay off my mortgage. Maybe you and the Dalletts ain't guilty of nothin', but you're friendly with Kilmer and you'll stay here till I can get hold of Sheriff Agnew. Fetch that box, boys."

Clanton, brows furrowed, strode out of the barn with Burrows' gun muzzling his side. He didn't intend that mule-jawed old Seth should collect bounty on the Kilmer outfit if he could prevent it. At that moment a cowhand charged around the house and down the yard, yelling:

"Big posse comin' up the creek, Seth!"

## CHAPTER V

"STEP lively, Clanton!" Burrows said, jabbing his pistol.

The punchers toting the express box hurried after them to high ground fronting the ranch house. Far down Stony Creek a thick dust cloud betokened many riders heading for the Triangle.

"Half a hundred if there's one!" exclaimed Burrows. "Ol' sheriff's expectin' us to fight. He'll be surprised to find we've rounded up the bad hats. Get my field glasses, Poke, in the office."

Poke departed and returned on the run, thrusting the binoculars into his boss's hand. Seth put away his gun to focus them on the posse. Brett glanced covertly at the punchers. They weren't watching him. Burrows spoke again.

"Ain't no lawman with that gang. Agnew wears the only white hat in the valley and I don't see it. Fanning's there—"

At that instant Brett snatched the gun protuding from Seth's waistband and spun him with the other hand. Burrows was between Clanton and the cowboys, a shield against any lead they felt like throwing.

"Order your men to free the prisoners!" Clanton rapped. "That gang would murder us. And I figure you're in the jackpot yourself. Fanning didn't bring the sheriff because he aims to recover the strongbox. Not only for the gold that's in it, but to get rid of a dangerous bit of evidence. When Magee reached

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Sandburr, he must've done some talkin' that scared Fanning."

Burrows showed the first sign of anxiety. "Put your guns down, boys. Fifty is bigger odds than I'd counted on. Say, Clanton, if we turn Kilmer's gang loose, will they help us fight?"

Brett answered scornfully, "Could you expect it, the way you've handled them? No. And you're so keen for that reward money, like as not you'd turn on them afterward."

"All right, all right," grumbled Burrows as Brett's gun prodded him. "Release them outlaws, boys."

The punchers turned reluctantly toward the house. Freed of their bonds, the longriders demanded weapons and got them. Led by Whip, they rushed for the horses in the yard. The riders from Sandburr had discovered they couldn't use the bridge and were plunging into Stony Creek. Releasing Burrows, Clanton ran to Cora and Jody as they descended the porch steps.

"Cora," said Brett, "I figure Fanning will chase us and attend to the Triangle later. Can't swing round 'em to reach Sandburr, but maybe you can get through to Sheriff Agnew. I'm takin' the express box. Tell Agnew to follow the stage road west. If they run me down, I'll fort up in a station."

The girl's eyes were bright with excitement. "I'll do what I can."

The outlaws were impatient to be off, for the vanguard of Fanning's gang were scrambling out of the creek. Clanton helped Cora to mount his horse. Whip took Jody up behind him, while Brett swung the express box onto Jody's horse and stepped into the saddle. Yells of recognition pealed from Fanning riders quirting up the slope. Undoubtedly they saw the strongbox balanced in front of Clanton.

Westward galloped the outlaw cavalcade. Sheering off from the Burrows ranch, the Fanning gang settled to the chase with clamoring guns. The few rifles owned by Kilmer men whanged defiance. Brett glanced back as he galloped. Cora Dallett had passed the ranch house on the far side and was heading down the eastern slope. A Fanning gunman took a shot at her, but she kept going, hugging the saddle.

When the Kilmer gang struck the stage road, leading their pursuers by half a mile, Brett said to Whip:

"There's a burned station just ahead. I was hopin' to reach the one beyond, but I see now that I can't. You don't want to meet the sheriff when he comes. Better take off in another direction, let Jody and me go it alone."

WHIP turned his grim, dust-powdered face. "Fanning would only split up his bunch and run us down separately. And you two couldn't hold out long. There'll be time enough later to dodge the sheriff."

They pounded out the last mile to the stage stop. All that remained of the station was a charred section of log wall, but the adobe corral, five feet high, stood intact because Fanning raiders hadn't been able to torch it. Lashing through the gateway, the party flung from saddles. Brett dropped the express box close to the wall, hunkered down beside Kilmer at the gate.

Their sixes broke into a stuttering roar as horsemen flashed past, circling the enclosure. Gunmen tumbled out of leather. Answering shots smashed gate poles and raked the pair holding the portal. Kilmer's men, aiming over the circular wall at various points, were taking toll of the fast-riding targets. But obliged to expose heads and shoulders as they drew bead, Fanning gunslingers were getting some of them in return.

A Winchester began coughing lead in a drop-fire. Brett turned from the gate, caught the flash of the rifle as it planted a bullet in an outlaw's back. One of Fanning's men had scaled the half-burned section of the station wall, finding toehold between the logs. He wasn't visible now, but his head would show when he shot again.

Gliding along the curving corral wall, Brett, his eyes raised, gun tilted up, stumbled just as the rifle was poked out, a dark-tanned face behind it. Quickly recovering, Clanton squeezed trigger. Bang of six-gun blended with the Winchester's snappish report. The saddle gun slipped from nerveless hands. There was a crash as the rifleman dropped from his high perch into debris at the foot.

Looking down, Brett saw that h[illegible] tripped over a mound of earth r[illegible] shaped with a spade but too sma[illegible]

grave. Struck by an idea, he opened the large blade of his pocket knife. While the fighting raged on all sides, Brett scooped out the earth until he had uncovered several canvas sacks, stenciled *Teton Express Company.*

"Loot of the Fanning gang," he muttered, swiftly filling in the hole. "They felt sure it'd be safe at this abandoned station till it could be got to town."

Later he told Whip and Jody about his find.

"What'd I tell you?" exclaimed Kilmer.

The afternoon waned. Those besieged in the corral had thinned the Fanning ranks, but their own were thinner still. Just Brett, Jody and Whip. And Whip shot in an arm and both legs, had been dragged away from the gate by his companions after repulsing a charge. They were discussing the serious shortage of ammunition when a horseman pounded up the road, yelling:

"Hey, Fanning, the sheriff's in sight!"

Brett had three bullets in his six-shooter, none in his cartridge belt. He looked at Whip, who spoke with a derisive grin.

"Too crippled to make a run for it. Only four cartridges left."

Jody said, "I used up all of mine."

Sounds at the unguarded gate indicated the Fanning gang was gathering for a final rush before Sheriff Agnew got there.

Brett, sinking to the ground, snapped, "Flat on your face, Jody! Make them think we got our tickets."

JODY plumped down. Brett and Whip lay on their sides, ready to pitch up guns if the deception didn't work. The splintered gate poles were kicked inward; gunmen warily entered. One shouted:

"They're all down, Fanning!"

"Go on, go on," urged the banker. "Pick up the express box. And we'd as well take what's in the cache. Some of Agnew's posse might find it."

The boots of thirty men scuffed up corral dust. The motionless forms on the ground were not subjected to close scrutiny, for the Sandburr gang was in a hurry. Fanning walked to the cache.

"Somebody's been digging here!" he shouted, and began clawing the loose dirt.

But he found the sacks undisturbed, [illegible] them out. The gang turned back [illegible]vate, grabbing up the express box. [illegible] rose quickly. "If Agnew don't get here soon, some of the gang will be ridin' off with that money while Fanning stays to bluff the sheriff. Whip, gimme your gun. I've got to delay 'em."

He stole toward the opening in the corral wall and looked out. The money sacks were disappearing into saddlebags. A mounted gunman clutched the strongbox. Hoofbeats on the road eastward made them all jumpy.

Brett's Colts ripped loose. He knocked the man with the box off his cayuse, killed two with heavy saddlebags, fast as he could trigger. Fanning and others jerked about to face the smoky gateway. A pistol in the crooked banker's hand spurted redly. Brett felled him. The roar of posse guns was music to Clanton's ears as he fired his last shot and scrambled back from the gate.

Sheriff Agnew dropped from the saddle, letting his men chase the fleeing gang. Brett stepped out as the lawman bent over the still form of Aubrey Fanning. Agnew glanced up.

"Howdy, Brett, you old smokeroo! Looks like Aubrey had paid in full. Where's the Kilmer wild bunch? I know about everything. Cora told me."

The girl rode up and slid to the ground. "I was afraid we wouldn't be in time, Brett! Where's Jody and Whip?"

Clanton took her arm, nodding to Agnew. "Come along, sheriff. One thing you don't know is that we found the stage loot buried by Fanning when he set out to wreck the Longbow Line."

The three entered the adobe corral. Jody, standing beside Whip, eyed the sheriff narrowly. Cora choked up when she tried to speak.

"Don't take on so," the outlaw said. "I'm not dyin' or likely to, until the law gets around to hangin' me. Eh, sheriff?"

Agnew pulled at his mustache. "Hate to take you in, Whip, now I've caught you. With the Dalletts and Clanton to testify in your favor, I believe you can beat a death sentence. I'll speak for you."

"You see—" Whip smiled at the strained faces of Cora and Jody—"you kids have nothin' to worry about."

Brett slipped an arm about the girl's waist. "Soon as I know if I'm to be reinstated as division agent—"

"Hargis'll take you back," declared Sheriff Agnew. "Fool if he don't."

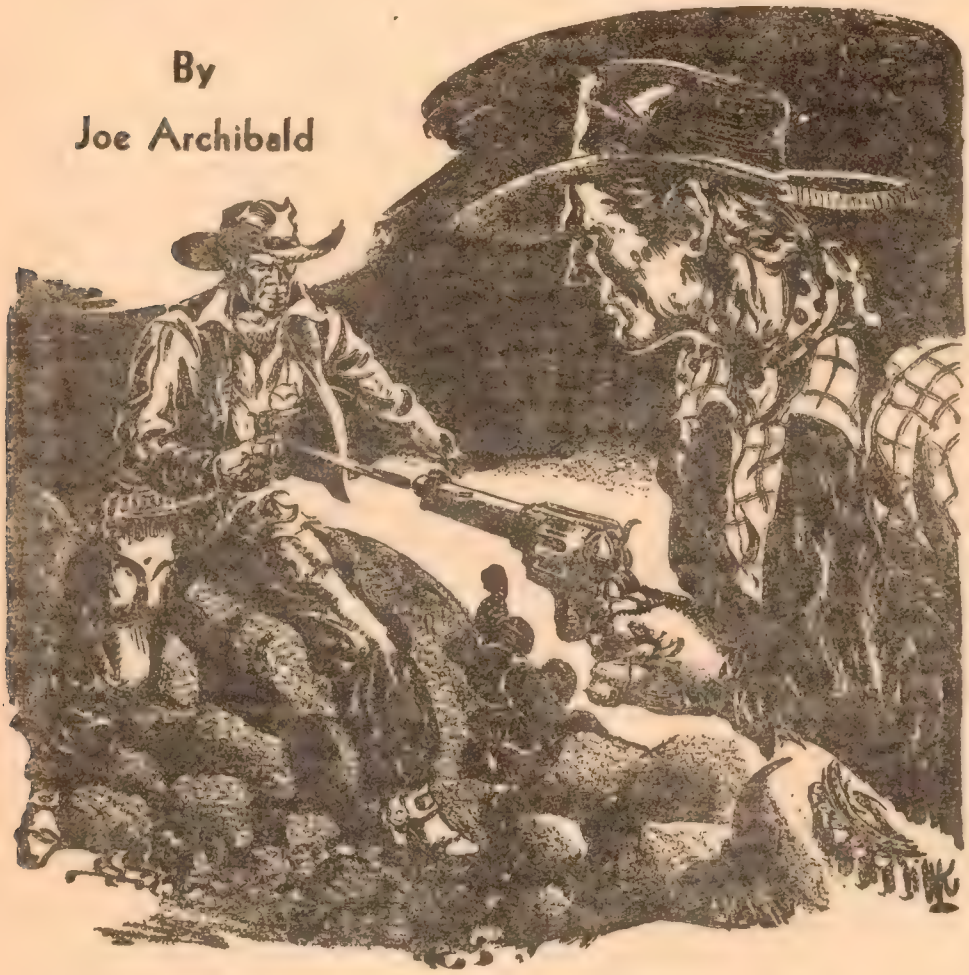
Brett, looking at Cora, read the answer to his unspoken question in her eyes.

*The last of the badmen thought he was a wizard at six-gun sorcery—until he had to reckon with the . . .*

# Magic of a Killer's Name

By

Joe Archibald



LONG TOM SMITH sat on the porch of the sheriff's office, his chair tipped back against the hot clapboards, and watched through half-closed eyes the man pacing up and down in front of Elbert's Dry Goods Store. Long Tom was crowding fifty and his skin was slowly being drawn tightly over the bones of his face.

There were little crow's tracks around his eyes that were still very sharp and very clear. His brain was as alert as it had ever been, and he could stay in the saddle as long as any man out on Charlie Oldham's Pothook. Charlie said he hoped Long Tom would live to be a hundred because he was the finest foreman he ever saw.

The picture down at the bottom of the slope was as old as the hills around

Hardin. The young puncher had come out of the barber shop and had been getting slicked up for fully twenty minutes. Lynn Carver was the prettiest girl in town and was due to quit work in Elbert's any minute now. Al Firebraugh, owner of the livery stable, walked past and Long Tom asked:

"That youngster down there, Al. Who is he? Never saw him before, yet—"

"Name of Dexer, Tom. Chan Dexer. Garvey took him on about ten days ago out at the Y Bench. Nice lookin' kid."

"Odd name," Long Tom said. "Seems to be a nervous cuss, don't he?" He got up and stretched and let the stiffness run out of him, then walked slowly down the hill, a hint of uneasiness beginning to stir inside him. There was a swing to Dexer's walk that bothered him and made his mind turn back. He walked up to the man and gave him a quick, searching scrutiny, and then grinned. "She's got a couple of minutes yet to get prinked up, son."

Dexer returned Long Tom's grin. "You're the Pothook foreman," he said. He gave Long Tom the cigarette he had built.

The older man said, "Don't mind if I do." He tried to keep his voice cool, even as his eyes slid down to the gun that was worn low on the kid's hip. "Kind of an invitation, son." Long Tom said. "Wearin' a Colt that way."

Dexer looked steadily at Long Tom, then smiled only with his lips. "I heard it was a peaceable country," he said. The statement was at the same time a question.

Long Tom nodded. "At present, Dexer. But you don't ever know." His eyes studied the slim hands that built another smoke and the stirring was in Long Tom again. "You can wake up in the mornin' and find everythin' calm and peaceful an' before sundown all Tophet can bust loose. That's the way it goes, son. Trouble is always close by an' you don't have to whistle for it."

Dexer suddenly whirled, went up the steps of Elbert's store and whipped off his hat. Long Tom knew by Lynn Carver's smile that Chan Dexer was a very fortunate man. There was a cold lump forming under his breastbone as he walked back up the hill.

Looking back, Long Tom saw the pair moving along the walk, very slowly. Only love could make two people move that slowly. Long Tom sat for a while, living in the dim past, then went down to the stable for his horse. He rode out to Hardin, taking a road that went nowhere near the Pothook spread.

DEEP in the hills back of the eastern wall of the valley, Long Tom Smith got out of the saddle. He picked himself a target, a knothole in a big oak tree fifty yards away, and turned slightly to the left. He quickly spun the other way, drew his gun and fired. Then he walked over to the big oak and picked at the punctured knot with a long forefinger. He smiled. It was his way of finding out just how old he was.

Long Tom hunkered down, his eyes looking at the country spread out below but not seeing it. He kept seeing the kid with the coal-black hair and the reckless eyes. There had been almost a fever in them, the kind of unhealthy light Long Tom had reason to remember.

"Dexer," the Pothook foreman said softly. "Used to be signs up north advertisin' a brand of cigar of that name." He thought of Lynn Carver and felt a crawling along his spine.

Three weeks later, Long Tom and three Pothook riders heard the sound of gunfire break and run through the hills. They were crossing a long narrow benchland on their way back to the ranch after a hard day of it in the windbreaks and potholes and gullies, hunting for strays. Weariness had them slumped in their saddles, but the six-gun music quickly straightened them.

Long Tom's voice was hoarse in the dusk. "On the other side of that hogback somewhere—the trouble we'd hoped we wouldn't see. Come on."

He wheeled his horse around and urged it to a long stride just as the guns pounded again. The Pothook riders topped the crest of the sharp ridge and saw a riderless horse galloping along the floor of an arroyo a quarter of a mile below. Getting in closer, they could see a small bunch of cattle milling uncertainly in the lea of a low bank. A pair of horsemen was keeping them bunched. Dust boiled up when three other riders slid their broncs down into the arroyo.

Long Tom rode down into the old river bed ahead of the others and yelled at a man holding a gun. He leaned out of the saddle and saw that it was Chan Dexer.

The Y Bench rider's teeth flashed in the gloom. He was grinning wide.

"Kid, what's the ruckus?" Long Tom asked.

"Caught 'em cold, Smith," Dexer said. "Rustling Y Bench stock. I got one for keeps an' winged another. Garvey said he never saw the skunks before. Their broncs had vented brands."

Garvey rode up and he said, "This is bad, Tom. See if you recognize the dead man."

A little thickset man was sprawled out on the ground, face downward. His Colt was not far from his stiff fingers. He had been shot through the chest. Long Tom turned him over and studied the lumpy unshaven face. He shook his head.

"Where's the other one?"

"Over there under that cottonwood," Garvey said. "Don't think he's got long."

The badly wounded man was tall and stringy. Blood trickled from a wound that was in a bad place.

"Talk," Long Tom said. "Cut it fine."

"The hell with you," the man forced out, looking past Long Tom. "Fast, my friend. Mighty fast!"

Long Tom turned slightly and saw Dexer standing there. The kid was still grinning wide.

Hank Garvey said, "This young hellion was alone when he trapped 'em, Tom."

"Gave this coyote an even shake with his iron," Dexer said. "Don't like killin' in cold blood, Garvey."

TIME rolled back and engulfed Long Tom. He heard a voice riding along the night wind and saw a pair of hands and a pair of eyes. When a wolf gets its first taste of blood the craving for more takes root in its brain.

"A friend of mine—got away," the dying rustler said. "He'll tell Kel—Kel Dutcher. I'm—Ollie D—" The man dug his fingers into his chest and his head dropped over on one shoulder. There was an ugly dry rattling sound and the rustler was dead.

"Kel Dutcher!" Garvey's voice was raspy in his throat.

Long Tom Smith suddenly felt very old. He remembered a grim pattern of life that had taken the best years from a man. The same pattern was being woven here in the valley. Kel Dutcher was the last of the famous killers. His name had become almost legend, and it was said he operated far from the Y Bench. The smell of blood and the sound of guns came out of the dim past in swirling convolutions—and memories that mocked.

Grim ghostly figures paraded past Long Tom's vision. The Earps, Stoudenmire, Plummer, Ives, Hal McQueen and Milo Trimmer. Exponents of gun rule, champions of the art of violence. Kel Dutcher was clinging to the grim tenets those men had left behind them.

Men like Dutcher were monsters that had survived a cataclysmic biological change. Long Tom knew, as he stood there close to the dead, that Kel Dutcher had to be destroyed lest the trade of killing be revived.

"I'll be expecting him," Chan Dexer said. "They say he's the fastest with a gun in the whole country, Smith."

"No matter how good a man is at anything, son," the Pothook foreman said hoarsely. "There is always somebody a lot better."

"Reckon," Dexer grinned. "I was thinkin' the same thing about Kel."

"Goes both ways, Dexer," Long Tom said. "I figure you better let the law take care of Dutcher when he comes. Al Firebraugh is the best checker player I've ever seen, but a man will come along some day and trim him good."

Riding toward Hardin, Garvey reined his bronc close to Long Tom's. He said, "I'm going to turn him loose, Tom. He's got gun fever. He's a born killer."

"Don't do it, Hank. Turned loose he'll be more apt to go hog-wild. Let's sit in on the game for a while," Long Tom said, and there was ice water in his veins.

In Hardin, Long Tom went to the saloon and had one of his infrequent drinks and leaned against the bar, strangely silent. The thirsty moved in and filled the place, and there was a confused babble of talk and sound. They talked of the gunplay out in the arroyo and a man said, "Talkin' about Kel Dutcher—they say he's even faster than Hal McQueen or Milo Trimmer ever was."

A harsh squeaky laugh that could only come out of the throats of the very old answered the assertion. Long Tom turned and looked at old Bill Harqueson sitting at a table a few yards away. Nobody in Hardin was very sure of Bill's age, but they would swear he had passed eighty. His eyes were bad and he felt his way around with a big cane.

"I saw Milo Trimmer sling his guns once," he said. "The time he shot the outlaw, Basser. Nobody was ever faster'n Milo Trimmer. Like lightnin' he was—"

"That's goin' back twenty years and more," a man said.

Long Tom spun his glass away and walked to the window and looked out into the night.

"But McQueen got him," someone said. "They found Trimmer out in the hills. The buzzards had finished him, but they couldn't eat his watch. The story was that McQueen and Trimmer were good friends, but they were gunmen and they had to find out somethin'. They had to find out who was the fastest. The story is they went out into the hills. McQueen never came back. They say he left the country where—"

"If they killed Milo Trimmer," Bill Harqueson said in a high-pitched voice, "they drygulched him. Nobody ever was as fast—"

LONG TOM SMITH went out into the street and walked slowly toward the boxlike hotel. The little nickelodeon was emptying its customers and the Pothook foreman spotted Lynn Carver and her mother. He saw Chan Dexer come out of the shadows of a great locust tree near the courthouse and walk toward the Carvers. Long Tom quickened his step.

"Dexer," he called out.

The Y Bench rider stopped and waited for Long Tom to come up. "Make it quick, Smith," he said. "I got to see the ladies home."

"They'll be all right, son," Long Tom said. "I'll ride to the Y Bench with you. Got some things I got to get off my mind, Dexer."

The younker hesitated. "All right. As soon as I have a word with her."

They rode out of Hardin through the thin mist and clattered over a corduroy bridge spanning a creek. The chill of more than the night was rubbing along Long Tom Smith's bones. He cursed the biological process that ages a man's frame far in advance of his brain and tried to get a logical reason for it. He thought of the girl and he knew his course was clear.

They swung toward the flats and cut across them. Riding up a twisted rugged short cut that led through a stretch of timber, they picked up the trail that dropped down toward Garvey's ranch. Long Tom pulled up his bronc's head in the timber and said:

"Let's stop here Dexer."

As they got off their broncs and built up their smokes Long Tom said suddenly, "You got to go away for a while, Dexer. Anywhere, as long as it's far enough from—"

"Me? Run away?" Dexer snapped and his even white teeth gleamed in the darkness. "What business is this of yours, Smith?"

"I'm makin' it my business, McQueen!"

The match the kid had nicked with his thumbnail and brought to a blaze, dropped from his cupped hands and struck the dry pine needles. Dexer seemed unaware of the little fire crackling at his feet. Long Tom reached over and banged the fire out with his hand.

Dexer said, "Why did you call me that?"

"You real name, ain't it, son? I saw Hal McQueen once. I saw him with Milo Trimmer—just after Trimmer had killed Basser," Long Tom said. "You're a ringer for your father—you've got the fever he always tried to lick."

"All right, Smith. All right. Do you think a McQueen would run from a skunk like Dutcher?"

"If he was smart. If he loved a girl like Lynn Carver, son. If you kill him, you and Lynn'll live a hell of uncertainty," Long Tom said in a dry voice. "If he kills you, son, a girl will eat out her heart for years to come."

"If I run away, I won't be able to look another man in the eye," Dexer said. "What is to be has to be, Smith. I'll be waiting here for Dutcher."

"The business of killing has about died out," the Pothook foreman said. "You and Dutcher are building it up again and as sure as I'm standing here, you'll both get an early grave, Dexer. Like Plummer, Ives—Milo Trimmer."

"My father did not kill Trimmer. He told me he didn't and that was enough for me, Smith!"

"If he didn't, then Milo Trimmer ran away, kid. The same as Hal McQueen. Nobody ever heard of Trimmer again."

"I ought to kill you for saying that," Dexer said in a dry dead voice. "He stopped carrying a gun because there was nobody to stand up to him. He couldn't kill in cold blood."

"You happen to kill Dutcher, other men will come to try their luck with you, Dexer. Killers have a hollow rotten pride about the business and they live so close to death the possibility of dying never scares them very much. A man can be fast with a gun, Dexer. He thinks he is invulnerable. I saw a gunman slip on a wet leaf once—it was the difference between life and death for him. Some little thing can trip them up—even a baby's sudden cry. That happened once up in—"

"You seem to know a lot about this killing business, don't you, Smith?" Dexer said. "I'll be here when Dutcher comes. It's in my blood, don't you understand? I got to know if—"

Long Tom shivered.

"He never should have had a son," Dexer said. "I think he is sorry he ever did. I remember him sitting and staring into space when I was only a little kid. When I got older he begged me not to carry a gun. Almost on his knees. But I had to get my hands on one, Smith. He told me stories—about himself and Trimmer. They were friends, but they had a mad desire to know which was the best man with a Colt.

"They went out into the hills one day; each gave his word he wouldn't shoot to kill. Both of them got hit. After that they weren't satisfied, Smith. They had to know, my father said. But when the day came for a showdown, Hal McQueen got on his horse and rode until he was a thousand miles away from Milo Trimmer. People lie when they say—"

THE mists were thick and there was a chill in the night air that bit deep into flesh and bone. Long Tom involuntarily dug his fingers into the flesh of his forearm.

"You're going to stand up to Dutcher, then."

"Yes," Chan Dexer said.

"You don't give a damn about your own life, kid. But Lynn Carver does. Without it she won't want hers very much," Long Tom said. He drew his gun quickly and pointed the muzzle straight at Dexer's chest. "I'll take that Colt, son!"

Dexer's breath was sucked in. For a few moments he weighed his chances and saw that they were bad.

"You go to hell, Smith," he said. "You wouldn't kill me."

"No, but I'd fix you so you couldn't fire a gun for a while," Long Tom said, and the sound of his own voice was strange in his ears.

"The hell with you!" Dexer's white teeth flashed in the dark. He reached out with his hand to pick up a handful of pine needles and mulch, but Long Tom's eyes were sharp even in the dark. He fired and Chan Dexer grunted with the pain of a bullet tearing along the flesh below his elbow. He went a little crazy when the Pothook foreman covered him with his long wiry body and nearly squeezed the breath out of him.

"You'll die for this," Dexer ground out.

"Long as *you* don't is all right with me," Long Tom said. He got up and looked down at the Y Bench rider. "Make up your own story of how you got that flesh wound, son. I'd get back to Hardin and let a doc patch you up if I was you. That arm'll be a little stiff for a week or so."

Chan Dexer drew his gun despite the wound in his arm and the effort wrung a cry of pain from his throat. Long Tom was walking to his horse, his back turned to the kid, when he called out:

"That would be cold-blooded murder, son!"

The next morning Long Tom Smith told Charlie Oldham he was taking some of the time off that was coming to him. He would be in Hardin if anybody needed him badly. He would be on the hotel porch, watching the world go by.

When he got to town he walked into the sheriff's office and said to Jim Ord, "Swear me in as a deputy, sheriff. Seems we've got a little trouble on our hands if my guess is good."

"Reckon, Long Tom. Doc Lewis said Dexer got him out of bed late last night to fix a gun wound," Ord said. "That spooky cuss has been doin' more shootin'. Figure we'll find a dead man around most any day. I've heard talk, Tom. The people here won't go back ten years, not while they know where they can get some rope. They'll hang Dexer if he brings the wolves in here."

"What'll they do about Kel Dutcher? They say he's on his way, Jim." Long Tom sat down and looked out the window at the road that led down from the hills back of Hardin.

"The thing to do is let him alone, Tom. Takes two to make a fight. I'll throw

Dexer in jail on some charge or another if he dares come into Hardin," the sheriff said.

"All of which sounds easy," Long Tom said, after he pinned on his badge. "You're pretty young, ain't you, Jim? You got a wife and two nice kids. You keep away from Kel. You've got a deputy now."

"Meanin'?"

"Nobody'll miss me, Jim. An' I've got a theory. If Dexer shot Dutcher, I reckon some salty hombres would come to the Y Bench to see if they were as good as the kid. If some old lawman happened to shoot Dutcher, they'd figure the killer had been livin' on a lot of bluff and ask themselves a lot of questions and there'd be doubt in their minds. Well, I think I'll go and smell around, Jim."

LONG TOM went in to see Al Firebraugh. The livery stable man was cursing a blue streak and was pouring himself a stiff drink out of a bottle.

"What's bit you, Al?"

"Tom, for twenty years I've been the best checker player in this part of the world," Al said, as he downed his consolation. "A drummer walked in here awhile ago and beat the pants off me. A dry goods drummer wearin' a derby hat and a curly mustache. Tom, I won't be able to lift up my head ag'in."

An omen, Long Tom thought. He chuckled and clutched at a straw. Every man had his Waterloo if he looked for it long enough. He needed a drink himself and asked for it.

As he crossed the street he saw Chan Dexer and Lynn Carver walking close together. Long Tom watched them go into the drugstore. The girl's face in the light of the doorway was turned toward the Y Bench rider, and Long Tom knew then that Kel Dutcher had to die.

Less than seventy-two hours later, a horseman rode into Hardin. He was tall in the saddle and his face was very lean. One of his slim restless hands hung loosely at his side. His eyes were never still. He turned his jaded sorrel over to Al Firebraugh, then crossed the street to Hardin's only saloon.

Long Tom Smith, leaning against the jamb of the hotel door, watched the man's walk and the way he wore his gun. The man walked like a big cat, his boots making very little sound and not kicking up the dust. The smoky doorway of the saloon swallowed the visitor to Hardin. Long Tom waited.

The Pothook foreman thought of things like a baby's cry and a slippery wet leaf. Little things that had nothing to do with human equation, but which could change the course of a life or bring it to an end. He looked up at the black velvet canopy studded with silvery stars and smiled thinly.

"A beautiful night," Long Tom said. "If it's the last." He went into the hotel and up to his room.

A few minutes later while playing solitaire, a knock sounded on his door.

"Come in, Al," he said.

Firebraugh said, "He took one drink, Tom. He didn't offer his name and nobody seemed to want to ask. There's no tellin' he's Dutcher. He's in the Greek's now, tyin' into a steak. He asked one question —wanted to know where he'd find a man named Dexer."

"So there's no tellin' he's Dutcher, Al? You must be gittin' old." Long Tom got up and slapped his big palm against his old holster.

"You don't aim to crowd him, Tom? Look, when a man is crowdin' fifty—"

Long Tom did not answer. He was thinking of the way a girl had looked at Dexer with her eyes all bright and shining, and he looked back over all his empty years.

Finally he said to Firebraugh, "Pass the word along, Al. Tell them all to keep off the streets."

"All right, Tom," Firebraugh said deep in his throat. "You're a strange cuss." He went out shaking his head. In the doorway he paused and turned around slowly. "Look, I'll get some of the boys—"

"No," the Pothook foreman said. "This is a job I got to do myself. Where's Jim Ord?"

"Up to his house, Tom."

"Go up there and see he don't leave it, Al."

A few minutes later, Long Tom went downstairs and out of the hotel. Crossing the street that was practically deserted, he stepped up to the board walk. He went past the Greek's and saw the gunman gulping the last dregs of his coffee. He moved along another few yards, then slipped into the shadows of an alleyway and waited.

The palms of his hands were moist,

and for the first time in many days he felt the maddening weight of his years. The livery stable was directly across the street. Al Firebraugh's bulky frame was silhouetted against the thin light of its open door. Long Tom kept his eyes on Firebraugh.

A NUMBING silence gripped the town. When someone banged a window down, the noise was like a clap of thunder. Al Firebraugh suddenly stretched his arms, then turned and went into the stable and slid the door shut. Kel Dutcher had left the restaurant.

Long Tom, after listening intently for several charged moments, heard the soft steps on the walk. The lean, catlike man went past the alleyway, paused a moment and seemed a little uncertain. Long Tom counted the seconds, took a deep breath, and slid the palms of his hands along his broad chest. Then he walked out of the mealy shadows and out into the street.

Fifty feet away, the stranger to Hardin stopped short and pivoted on his heels. He tipped his hat back on his head and stared at Long Tom Smith.

"Mister," Long Tom said, "they tell me you are lookin' for a man named Chan Dexer."

"What business is that of yours, my friend?"

"What is any killer's business?" Long Tom asked and was surprised to find out he was no longer nervous. Time rolled back and pulled all the stiffness out of his arms and legs. "Dexer is hurt, Dutcher! He couldn't stand up to you."

"So? Then I'll come back in a few days, friend." Kel Dutcher grinned and let his muscles loosen.

"If you can leave tonight," Long Tom said. "I'm actin' for Chan Dexer, Dutcher!"

A little prayer was on Long Tom's lips. He rolled words over it. "Let's get it finished, Dutcher!"

"Who are you?" the gunman called out hoarsely. "Who the hell—"

"Milo Trimmer! Grab, Dutcher, you—"

Long Tom had staked everything on the element of surprise, of sudden shock. That one little thing. Dutcher's mouth snapped open. During that brief moment between the challenge and the sound of roaring guns, the killer's muscles had refused to work. Long Tom drew and fired. Somehow he knew he had been just quick enough, despite the impact of lead that spun him half around and drove him against a lamp post.

As he held on and peered through the curling smoke he saw Kel Dutcher on the ground, digging his fingers into the dust. Men started pouring out of the buildings on either side of the street when Long Tom staggered toward the dead man and dropped on one knee beside him.

"Trimmer!" Kel Dutcher choked out with his blood. "They said you were dead —kind of stopped me for a second, Trimmer—just enough to—"

"Tom!" Firebraugh yelled. "Tom—"

"Everythin's all right," the Pothook foreman said. He got to his feet and swayed against Firebraugh. "I got winged a little—in the shoulder. Dutcher's dead, Al. Somebody git me a drink—somebody git Doc Lewis."

"Got him dead center," a man said, "Tom, you beat Kel Dutcher to the—"

"With a name," Long Tom grinned and let them help him along the walk. "Told him I was Milo Trimmer. Held him up a mite. There's magic in that name, gents—" The walk undulated beneath his feet, and the buildings close to it were beginning to spin around. "Watch it, I'm goin' to keel over," he said.

Hours later, Long Tom Smith sat up in his bed at the hotel. Chan Dexer came in and shut the door softly behind him.

"How you feelin', Smith?" Dexer asked.

"Older'n I did a week ago, son. Figure I was right about them little things that trip up a man."

"Like the name of Milo Trimmer," Dexer said. "It took a little more than that, old-timer. Just a mite more an' you know it."

"I've shot off a lot of guns in my day if that's what you mean, son," Long Tom said.

"Pretty common name, Smith," Dexer said. "I helped Doc Lewis fix you up after you killed Dutcher. Wasn't the first time you had a bullet wound dressed, was it? Bet that old one in your arm kicks up when the weather ain't just right. Haven't thanked you yet, have I, *Smith*? The best way is to tell you I threw that Colt of mine down the well over at Lynn Carver's place."

"Good," Long Tom said. "That's fine."

Dexer said, "I'd like to give you this,

Tom." He took a big gold watch out of his pocket and laid it on the bed.

"Thanks, kid. Haven't had one that was any good since I lost mine in a poker game up at—" Long Tom bit off the rest of his words, and Dexer got up and walked to the door.

Before he went out he grinned back at Long Tom and said, "Any time you ever get up to Salina, Montana, drop in and see H. J. Dexer, hay and feed. I bet he'll be glad to see you, *Smith.*"

"Feel like takin' a trip," Long Tom said. "Look out for that loose board at the top of the stairs goin' down, Chan. Little things can trip a man up and hurt him bad."

Old Bill Harqueson passed Al Firebraugh's stable that night. He heard a rider say to Al as he got his bronc, "Imagine the old coot foxin' Kel Dutcher like he did. Makin' out he was Milo Trimmer."

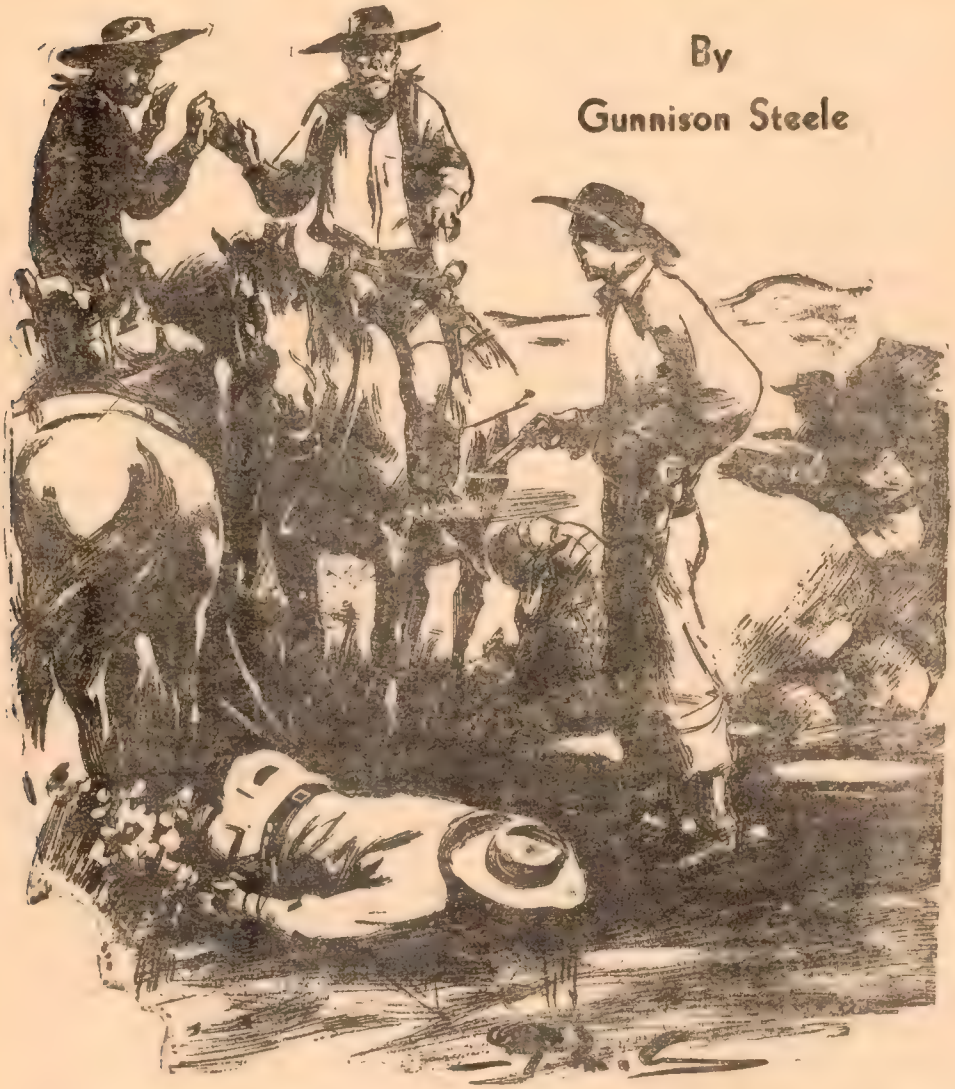
Old Bill chuckled in his beard and hobbled on. Those young squirts thought he was a little touched in the head and that he could not see very well any more. But he could see all right. Those old eyes of his had been pretty sharp the day they had watched Milo Trimmer get the outlaw Basser.

"The fools," old Bill muttered to himself. "Nobody ever lived who was as fast as Milo Trimmer."

# Paroled from Powdersmoke

By

Gunnison Steele



***They told Storm Kelly, "You're a killer, born to gunsmoke. It won't let you have peace. It'll follow you wherever you go." And though Storm rode far on his peace mission, that gun thunder followed him. Until Storm learned the only road left to quiet was through the center of a pistol tornado.***

COLDNESS stirred inside Storm Kelly, marshal of Indian Wells, as he looked out a window and saw paunchy, bald Mayor Jethro Abel hurrying along the street.

Storm Kelly was a tall, yellow-haired man with angular brown features. He was lightning fast with the silver-handled guns he wore, and he was afraid of no man alive. It was a sickness inside him that caused the coldness.

Mayor Abel came into the office, breathing heavily. "There's a job for you down the street, Marshal," he said excitedly.

Softly, Storm asked, "What kind of job?"

"A gent's bustin' Jake Argo's place all to hell. He keeps askin' where the great Storm Kelly is. Says he aims to kill you."

"Who is he?"

"Don't know. But he's packin' two guns, tied down. You better go do somethin' about it."

Storm said tiredly, "I'll do something."

The mayor smiled and said, "Then I'll go see the undertaker!" He hurried out, angling across the street.

Storm Kelly grimaced, got to his feet. Always, when he went out to meet a man, arrangements were made for a funeral. Not his funeral, but his opponent's. Some of them outlaws, killers, some mere glory-seekers—but all wanting the honor of killing the great Storm Kelly.

He went along the boardwalk toward Jake Argo's saloon. The town was quiet, expectant. He saw faces peering from doorways and windows, and he thought sardonically:

*They think I want to kill. They think I'm like a wolf, eager for blood, hiding behind a badge to do it. The fools!*

HE WENT between the batwings of Jake's place. Jake, a skinny, pale-eyed man, sighed with relief when he saw Storm. Half a dozen men were in the room, but Storm's gaze riveted instantly on the slender, towheaded figure standing alone at the bar. He'd never seen the reckless-eyed, half-drunk youngster before.

Storm felt the sickness lift inside him again. He said softly, "What's the trouble, kid?"

The youngster whirled, staring hotly at the marshal. He snapped fiercely, "None of your darn business, mister! Gent I'm lookin' for is that steel-clawed, curly-tailed, gun-cat of a town marshal, Storm Kelly!"

"What you got against him?"

"He killed my pard, shot him in the back, and I aim to collect pay for it! You seen Storm Kelly?"

"Me," Storm said gently. "I'm Storm [illegible]ly."

[illegible] youngster swallowed hard, seemed [illegible] a little, but he said harshly, "Then [illegible]he stripe-bellied skunk that shot my pard, Slim Riker, in the back. I aim to kill you!"

Storm said quickly, "I didn't shoot Slim Riker in the back. Slim had got mixed up with a bad bunch. He helped rob a bank. When I went to arrest him, he grabbed for his gun. I *had* to kill him—"

"That's a rotten lie!" the towhead yelled hoarsely. "You murdered him. Grab your guns!"

Storm said desperately, "Wait, kid—don't make me kill *you!* Go sober up, then we'll talk this over."

But the youngster was beyond reason. He screamed, "Draw, blast you, draw!" and clawed wildly for his own gun.

Storm Kelly's hand moved with incredible speed. A gunshot blasted. The towhead slammed back against the bar with a broken shoulder, then slid down to the floor and sat there dazedly.

A black-clad, hunchbacked little man, looking startlingly like a buzzard, scuttled into the room. Lee Gort, the undertaker, looked from Storm Kelly to the moaning youth on the floor.

Accusingly, he said, "Marshal, you didn't kill him!"

Distastefully, Storm turned away. He went out and along the street to his office. Mayor Abel was there.

He asked eagerly, "It's over, Marshal, you killed him?"

Storm said, "It was just a kid who'd heard some lies and had propped up his nerve with whisky."

"He was destroying property, though, maybe would have killed somebody. We're lucky to have you to protect us, Kelly."

"You haven't. Effective right now, I'm resignin'!"

Consternation on his fat face, Mayor Abel looked from Storm Kelly to the badge he'd unpinned and tossed onto the desk. Like most others in Indian Wells, he had no real affection for Storm Kelly. But Storm had saved them money, kept their stores, banks and families safe.

"You're joking, Kelly!" he spluttered.

"Not joking—quitting!"

The mayor smiled, spread fat hands. "I understand. You want more money. Maybe that can be arranged."

"Money couldn't buy what I want," Storm said stonily.

Mayor Abel said resentfully, "You're not showing much gratitude for what

we've done for you, Kelly. We've made your killings legal. You've satisfied your lust to kill, and it has brought you handsome profits. What more do you want?"

Storm Kelly said coldly, "I want peace. I want to have a home, a family and friends like other men."

The mayor smiled again, sardonically. "You might as well want the moon, Kelly. You were born to gunsmoke. You can't get away from it. It will follow you wherever you go. It won't let you have peace, won't let you have friends and a family like other men. You're a killer and you can't—"

Storm Kelly reached a slender-fingered hand and seized the mayor by the scruff of his fat neck. He marched Jethro Abel to the door, flung him headlong into the street. Whereupon the paunchy little mayor, whimpering with fear, scrambled to his feet and scampered undignifiedly away.

TROUBLE lay like a bad odor over Gunlock Basin. But it hadn't touched Storm Kelly. He was at peace with the world as he neared the town of Warspur this afternoon. Autumn had painted the Wyoming rangeland and hills with its rich colors. The air was cool, spiced with the pungent smell of woodsmoke.

Storm was riding in from his homestead on Wigwam Creek. He wore no gun, had worn none since coming here a year and a half ago. Deliberately, he had played the part of a meek, unobtrusive man who hated guns and physical violence. Men respected him, liked him, but privately agreed that he was too peaceable for even his own good. On several occasions they had seen him back away from trouble.

"Just not a fightin' man," they agreed.

Storm probed a quick glance along Warspur's main drag as he entered its upper end. The town lay quiet and still, without sign of the trouble that Cave Landrum was fomenting in the basin.

Cave Landrum owned the big 77 outfit, as well as a big part of Warspur. He was powerful rapacious, and he was reaching out, ruthlessly crushing those who got in his way. And he could get by with it because he owned the Warspur law.

Storm Kelly's gaze focused suddenly on two figures standing before a frame building: a blocky, heavy-boned man who was holding the reins of two saddled horses—and a lanky, redhaired, hawk-faced man. The two seemed to be arguing. The blocky man seemed excited, angry; the redhead was grinning.

As he drew closer, Storm heard the blocky man say shrilly, "You're a lyin', yella-bellied skunk, Lager! I savvy your game—Landrum wants me killed, and you've got the job!"

The lanky redhead was cursing the oldster in a low, savagely eager voice. Storm felt a queer coldness inside him. He was almost even with them now—too late to turn and ride away.

He knew these two. The blocky oldster was Sam Torget, who owned the Box T outfit just north of his own place. The redhaired hombre was Ben Lager, one of Cave Landrum's hired killers.

Suddenly Torget dropped the reins he'd been holding. His face white with rage, he grabbed with a desperate, fumbling hand for his gun. Storm knew instantly that he didn't have a chance.

Just as Lager's hand slashed downward, Storm Kelly hurled himself from the saddle. Savagely, he blasted his fist into the gunman's face. Lager reeled backward, his gun thudding into the dust; he braced himself, shaking his head dazedly.

Storm lunged in close. Again his fist exploded on Lager's chin. Lager sprawled forward into the dust, out cold.

Torget was yelling, pulling at his arm. A slender, coppery-haired girl, dressed in boots and denims, had darted from the frame building. Anxiety stained her blue eyes. This was Sue Torget, Sam's daughter—and a little more than Storm's neighbor.

"Are you all right, Daddy?" she cried.

Torget said, "I'm fine, but I wouldn't be if it wasn't for Storm Kelly. By guppy, I didn't think he had it in him!"

Sue said swiftly, "You saved Daddy's life. Lager meant to taunt him into drawing, then kill him. Landrum is behind it. And now he'll be after you, for interfering. We'd better ride!"

A dozen men were converging swiftly on them. Storm said quickly, "Yes, we'll ride," and remounted. He waited for Torget and Sue to mount and swing in beside him. Then they rode swiftly out of town.

AS THEY rode along, he thought, *I should have minded my own business. Now I'll have to run—or fight.* He remembered what Mayor Jethro Abel had said:

"You were born to gunsmoke, and you can't get away from it. It will follow you wherever you go. . . ."

Almost, he'd come to believe that Abel was wrong. Once, two months after leaving Indian Wells, a half-drunk, would-be gunman had faced Storm in an Arizona saloon. He'd sneered:

"Say, ain't you Storm Kelly, the Texas gun-cat? I saw you kill a man once, in Indian Wells. Turned yellow, huh, and quit wearin' your fancy guns? Well, blast you, that don't let you out!"

And he'd slapped Storm's face. He'd cursed Storm and yelled, "Get a gun and meet me—or get outa town!"

Storm Kelly had ridden, like a man driven by unreasoning fear. He'd turned his back on gunsmoke and killing. He meant for nothing to change it. He liked it here, had taken root in the fertile soil. If only Cave Landrum would let him alone. . . .

But Landrum didn't let him alone. Two days after the incident in Warspur, just at sunset. Cave Landrum and half a dozen of his tough hands rode up and stopped before Storm's log ranch house on Wigwam Creek. Storm was at the corral pouring water through the poles into a trough.

The old coldness was inside him as he saw the 77 riders. They rode over to him and stopped. Some of them were grinning. Landrum was a tall, powerful man about Storm's age, with cruelty and arrogance plain on his dark face. He looked coldly and unsmilingly at Storm with shiny black eyes.

Storm carefully set the pail on the ground and said, "Howdy, gents. Light down and rest?"

They dismounted and came up close to Storm. Landrum said, "We're not tired. I'm here on business, Kelly."

"What kind of business?"

"The same kind you interfered with two days ago. I thought you didn't have the guts to fight, but it seems I was wrong. You went out of your way to hunt trouble, didn't you?"

"I hate trouble. I want none with you."

"You've got it, feller, whether or not you want it. I've let you stay here on Wigwam for just one reason—because I figured you were too spineless to cause me trouble. Because I knew I could move in and take over when I got around to you. I wasn't ready, but what you done in Warspur changes things. I don't like to be interfered with."

"Which adds up to what?"

"You're through here," Landrum said bluntly. "Get out!"

Storm said mildly, "I like it here. There's plenty of room, and no cause for trouble between us."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Will you?" He held himself rigidly in check. He said, "I'm a man of peace, Landrum. I wear no guns. How would you fight a man like that?"

Among the riders, standing closest to Storm, was a buck-toothed, powerful man. Now Landrum said softly to this man, "Mess him up, Jake!"

Jake lunged suddenly forward and slammed into Storm, smashing him savagely back against the corral poles. Stunned, Storm caught Jake about the thick waist. Jake hunched his shoulders and struck sharply upward, his head cracking like a pistol shot against Storm's chin.

The treacherous blow fogged Storm's brain with a dark mist. It made him murderously angry. Using all his strength, he flung Jake aside, avoiding Jake's knees that were driving upward for his stomach. Jake drove back at him, grinning. Storm side-stepped, letting him smack solidly into the corral poles. Then Storm grabbed him by the throat, jerked him backward, turned loose with one hand and hammered Jake savagely in the face.

The blow knocked Jake to the ground. He lay on his stomach, writhing, trying to get up. Storm waited, breathing hard, and he heard Cave Landrum say:

"I was *bad* wrong about you, feller. But we'll fix that. Take 'im, boys, and do a damn good job!"

A fist hit Storm from behind, on the neck. When he staggered and tried to whirl, another one caught him in the face. Then he saw that he was in for a beating. Landrum's toughs were coming at him from all sides, the eager look of attacking wolves on their hard faces. Storm Kelly fought savagely, silently, knowing it was a hopeless fight.

He saw a clubbed gun in one man's hand. Fists blasted at his face. They beat him down to the ground. As he lay there

he felt the numbing crunch of heavy boots against flesh and bone.

He knew that they kept on beating him, long after he'd ceased to feel pain, and that dark mist deepened in his brain. Afterward, he had the vague impression of movement and knew that he was on a horse, with shadowy figures about him. Then, for a long while, he knew nothing at all.

HE FOUGHT his way back to consciousness through swirling red mists of pain. Bright sunlight was in his eyes. He lay still and thought about that. The last he remembered it had been dusk —now the sun was just above the eastern horizon. And he knew that he'd been unconscious for almost twelve hours.

He rolled on his stomach, stifling a groan. His body, from head to feet, ached dully; his arms, legs and face felt stiff. Then he remembered the brutal beating Landrum's riders had given him. He got to his hands and knees, then to his feet and looked about him.

Rimming the northern horizon was a ragged line of low peaks. Rough, bare land stretched on all sides. Instantly, Storm Kelly realized where he was: Satan's Sink, a desolate, waterless expanse of badlands, sun-tortured, and lashed by hot winds, stretching across the northern end of the basin. From the badlands' edge it was a full twenty miles to the nearest ranch.

Not satisfied with beating him half to death, Cave Landrum had brought him here and left him for nature to finish the job! He felt a rush of fierce anger. Storm Kelly, gun-marshal, beaten up and left to die by a bunch of two-bit toughs! Then he curbed his slashing thoughts. He wasn't in Texas now, and he wasn't a gunslinger. He was a peace-lovin' rancher, who didn't even wear a shooting iron. He started walking southward, but he was sick and weak. He'd gone no more than a quarter-mile when he had to stop and rest. The beating had taken a lot out of him. He could feel dried blood on his face; his body was a mass of cuts and bruises. He needed rest and patching up.

He got up and went on again. The sun arced higher and was blazing hot. He was thirsty, feverish. Landrum had left him here to die—the knowledge burned like a fierce flame in his mind.

He staggered on and on, losing all sense of time and distance. His thirst was a thing alive; his whole body seemed aflame. Fever had hold of him with clutching hands. He knew that midday had come and gone—then he knew finally that he could never make it.

He was sprawled in the shade of a boulder, when he saw the rider coming toward him. At first, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. Then he saw that it was Sue Torget.

She saw him, spurred her buckskin forward and halted a few yards away. He tried to get up, tried to grin, but failed at both and sank back to the ground. She jumped to the ground and ran toward him, a canteen in her hands.

She held the canteen to his lips and let him drink. She dampened a handkerchief and wiped some of the blood from his face.

"Landrum did it, didn't he?" she asked.

Storm said, "Had it done. How'd you get here?"

"I saw smoke from the direction of your place early this morning. I was worried and rode over. When I saw your burned ranch house, I knew something terrible had happened."

He felt a little shock. "So they burned my place?"

"The house, sheds, everything. You didn't know?"

He said grimly, "That was before they had their go at me. I didn't know anything until I woke up out here." He told her what had happened, and asked again:

"How'd you get here?"

"I followed the sign left by Landrum's men when they took you away. It was slow work. It was noon before I found where they'd left you back there. Then I had to follow your trail."

He said, "I couldn't have gotten up again. I'm obliged."

Sue Torget looked at him with a queer light in her eyes. She said, "We'll head back for our place. What will you do now?"

He shrugged. "Landrum warned me out of the valley."

"Will you go?"

He delayed his answer, then said, "I don't know."

He mounted the buckskin, with Sue behind the saddle steadying him, and they rode out of the badlands. It was almost sundown when they reached the Box T

SAM TORGET and the girl put him to bed, doctored his cuts and bruises the best they could. Torget listened grim-faced to the tale of what had happened.

"It was because of what you did in Warspur," Sue declared. "If Landrum gets by with this, there'll be nothing to stop him. He's gradually taking over the smaller outfits. Daddy is next."

"You don't know that, girl," Torget protested.

"I know it and you do, too! Landrum knows the small ranchers have been trying to organize to fight him. He knows you're their leader. So he wants you out of the way. He'll do it, too, unless—"

Storm asked, "Unless what?"

Looking straight at him she said, "Unless there's some man who can meet Cave Landrum, face to face, and kill him!"

Torget asked curiously, "What will you do now, Kelly?"

Storm said, "What *can* I do? I had nothing when I came here. I could start somewhere else the same way—someplace where there is not so much violence and killing."

He saw the puzzlement in Sam Torget's eyes. He saw the slow drawing away of Sue, the lessening of the challenge in her young eyes. They couldn't understand a man who refused to fight for what was his.

He thought bitterly, *They don't know. They haven't seen the hate and pain and terror in men's eyes as they die.*

"I hate fighting and killing," Sue was saying. "But I hate the thought of a thieving murderer like Cave Landrum, chasing us out of our homes and stealing our range. What we need is men who know guns and have the nerve to use them!"

She got up and left the room.

Storm wasn't badly hurt. He mended rapidly. He was able to hobble about the next day. By the fourth day most of the soreness had left him, and he had regained most of his strength. He'd had plenty of time to think. Quite calmly, he'd thought it out and had his answer.

He could run; he could go somewhere else, start a new outfit and have peace—for awhile, as he'd had here. Or he could fight, and stand the almost certain chance of being branded anew with the old gunsmoke brand. If that happened—if they discovered that he was really Storm Kelly, the Texas gun-marshal—then he might as well be back in Indian Wells. The gunmen, the killers and glory-seekers, wouldn't let him rest.

Cave Landrum was after Sam Torget. He would be after Storm, too, when he found out Storm was here. Landrum was drunk on power and greed. He was out to own the rich basin. Reports drifted to the Box T. Cattle were stolen, fences cut and terror was abroad by night. A small rancher in the southern end of the valley was shot down by night-riders as he fled from his burning ranch house.

"It's useless," Sue Torget said despairingly. "We can't fight Landrum. Daddy has been staying away from town, but now I'm afraid Landrum won't wait for him to leave the ranch. Cut off the snake's head and the whole snake dies—if somebody would only kill Landrum!"

Storm said, "A hard job."

"Not for the right man!"

LATE afternoon of Storm's fifth day at the Box T, Cave Landrum and three of his tough riders crossed a small meadow below the ranch house and came slowly in. Storm, watching from a window of the house, knew that Landrum had grown tired of waiting.

Storm Kelly sat very still, knowing that the hour for running had turned late. He could hear Sue in another part of the house. He saw Sam Torget come from the barn, glance toward the four riders and stiffen suddenly. Torget whirled and started toward the house, then stopped, whirled back, and stood facing the oncoming riders squarely.

The riders came on and stopped before Sam Torget. Their faces were cold and hard, their eyes wary. Torget wore a gun. They would take little chance with him. Silence and tension seemed to have followed them in from the meadow, and it was a dark, sinister thing.

Storm heard Landrum say gently, "Been stayin' pretty close to home lately, haven't you, Sam?"

Torget asked flatly, "What do you want here?"

"Sam," Landrum said, "I offered to buy your outfit once, two years ago. You said it wasn't for sale. You said you wanted to stay here. You stayed, and you've talked against me, causin' me a lot of trouble. You've made others fight me."

Sam Torget's face showed gray and

taut. He said quickly, "That was two years ago. Sometimes a man changes his mind."

"Too late." Landrum's hands had been folded motionless on the saddlehorn, now one of them moved with an impatient gesture. "You were stubborn, Sam. You wanted to stay here. Well, you'll stay here —a long time!"

The bulldog stubbornness had left Torget's face, leaving it loose and old. He said raggedly, "It's a hard thing, Landrum, not givin' a man a chance—"

Storm Kelly heard a sound behind him. When he turned, he saw that Sue Torget had come into the room. She didn't even look at him. She ran to an old trunk, opened the lid and rummaged down under some clothes. She lifted out a gunbelt that was weighted with a bone-handled .45 Colt revolver. Her face was pale, set and frightened, her hands unsteady, as she buckled the heavy gunbelt about her slender waist.

Storm got to his feet. He asked, sharply. "What're you goin' to do?"

She looked at him, without seeming to see him. Her voice was fierce. "You ask that—knowing what's about to happen out there! I'm going to help Daddy, of course!"

"What can you do?"

"I can die, if he does! Are you too stupid to see what's about to happen out there? They're going to kill father—murder him—without giving him a chance. And you stand by and let them do it—Storm Kelly, the great Texas gun-marshal!"

He felt like icy water had been dashed over him. He stammered, "I—you know about that?"

"Of course I know it—I've known it ever since you came here. I saw a picture of you in a Denver paper, at the time you resigned and left Texas. I've never mentioned it, because I knew what you were doing. But it doesn't matter now!"

She whirled and ran through the doorway. Without meaning to, Storm leaped after her. He overtook her in the hallway and caught her in his arms. She struggled fiercely, until he said sharply:

"Quit fightin'—and give me that gunbelt!"

She quieted, stood very still as he unbuckled the gunbelt and slapped it about his own waist. She watched as he whirled and walked swiftly out into the late sunlight.

STILL gently, Landrum was saying, "Too late, Sam. If you left you might come back, might talk. My way is best."

He stopped talking and turned his head without moving his body, to look at Storm Kelly as he came up. Surprise slapped briefly at the 77 man's face and was wiped away. Storm didn't come up beside Sam Torget; he stopped ten yards to one side, drawing the attention of the four.

"So," Landrum murmured, smiling a little. "The homesteader again. My friend, you're full of surprises."

Storm said, "This is the biggest—and the last for you! Landrum, you're wearin' a gun. Use it!"

The flat challenge knocked Landrum off balance. He quit smiling, his eyes narrowing down; he sensed something unusual and unexpected. It made him wary. He flicked a glance at his henchmen. They, too, had sensed the change in Storm Kelly.

Landrum said cautiously, "That's a big order, friend. You think you can make it stick?"

"I think I can!"

"Why'd you come back here?"

"I didn't know, until just now. Now I know I meant to kill you all the time. You've got just three second to draw!"

Cave Landrum drew, yelling to his men, flinging his body sidewise in the saddle at the same time. Two years hadn't slowed the incredible smoothness and swiftness of Storm's draw. A gunshot crashed. Landrum slumped forward, an arm hanging loosely on each side of his horse's neck, unbelief shining in his black eyes.

His unfired gun thudded to the ground first; Landrum followed, landing on his shoulders, then rolling on his stomach as he was dragged a few feet by his frightened horse before the reins jerked loose from his hand.

Meanwhile the blocky man, Jake, who had started the fight with Storm the time before, had grabbed for his gun. He got in a shot. But he was rattled and the bullet snarled past Storm's head. Deliberately, Storm put a bullet where he wanted it. Jake yelled and dropped his gun, grabbing at his broken shoulder.

By now Sam Torget had his gun out and he yelled, "Draw, you snake-bellied skunks, or I'll cut you down!"

But the remaining two 77 riders didn't draw. They stared with stunned eyes down at Cave Landrum, the man they'd thought unbeatable. They moved their hands well away from their guns.

Storm said, "Tie your boss on his horse and take him to town. Then you'd better ride, far and fast. Pass the word around before you go. Your kind are through in this valley. You've got till sundown tomorrow to clear out."

One of them said, "It won't take near that long, mister!"

They tied the dead man to his saddle, mounted, and rode back across the little meadow.

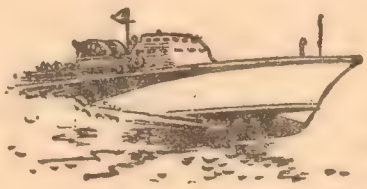
Sue Torget had come up to them, her face radiant in the sun's red glow. Storm Kelly looked at her, and said:

"Queer. But, even now, I believe Jethro Abel was wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"Jethro Abel said, 'You were born to gunsmoke, and you can't get away from it. It won't let you have peace, won't let you have friends and a family like other men.'"

Smiling softly at him, Sue Torget said, "I don't know Jethro Abel, but I know he was wrong. We'll *prove* he was wrong!"


BUY  BONDS

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# .45 Fever in Mesabe

By L. P. Holmes

***A couple of two-bit outfits were turning that peaceful cowtown into a bullet battleground. But when they scoffed at the warning of the six old men of Mesabe, a six-gun surprise awaited them. For the oldsters hadn't forgotten how to use the tactics of pistol pioneers.***

IT HAD been a particularly pointless, savage, messy killing. The victim a Triangle Bar rider, the killers four Broken Circle M men. They got him crossing the street, right out in front of Charlie Lott's store. They let him get well out, with no vestige of cover anywhere about him. Then they showed, the four of them, two on each side of the street, all of them opening up in a deadly cross fire.

Charlie Lott saw all of it. He saw the luckless victim spin and jerk, pounded this way and that by the crashing lead, then finally go down all loose and broken up. After which the Broken Circle M men calmly rode out of town.

Gathering with the rest of the crowd, Charlie Lott ordered the body carried over and out of sight in Ben Spann's livery barn.

"Better send your roustabout out to the Triangle Bar and tell them to come and get him, Ben," Charlie suggested.

"All right," nodded Ben. Then he added, his voice somber, "This is the fourth in little over a month. What's our town coming to, Charlie?"

Back in his store, Charlie had quite an influx of callers. Most of them, knowing that Charlie had seen it all, were just morbidly curious about the details, and with these Charlie was short and curt. So they left, to go and hang around the livery barn, waiting for someone from the Triangle Bar to come and claim their dead. Left at the store were finally some half-dozen old men.

Charlie Lott, for one. And Abe Connors, the saddle maker, Doc Terwilliger, who ran the hotel, Pete Evans, the blacksmith, Henry Caldwell, the freighter, and Buck Handy, who owned and ran the Sunset Saloon. Buck's saloon was one of the oldest and most venerated establishments in the town of Mesabe, a place where men drank their liquor like gentlemen, never drank too much, and played their draw and stud poker games for relaxation and nothing more.

NO TOCSIN had been rung, no call sent out to bring about this gathering. Nor had it just happened. Each one, it seemed, had felt that this final killing had brought about a crisis and a need for some kind of action beyond just a negative acceptance of an intolerable condition.

Pete Evans said slowly, "A few more like this last one and our town will have a name to scare little kids with."

Doc Terwilliger combed his white imperial with thoughtful fingers. "We've kept it a good town for a long, long time," he said in that quiet, precise way of his. "We've watched it grow from a crossroads junction. Back in our tough days we had our shooting affairs, but they were mostly man to man, the honest settling of differences by a mode long accepted as reasonably honorable and decisive.

"Gradually, as we grew up, we managed to discourage even that. Those who felt they just had to swap lead, learned it was safer for the victor to have that smoke-slinging take place somewhere else than in Mesabe. We made it tougher and tougher for a self-defense plea to stand up. In that way we became a decent, law-abiding community. Now we are right back to a condition worse than any we ever knew. Gentlemen, we must do something about this state of affairs."

"That was murder out there today," said Charlie Lott. "Cold-blooded, deliberate. Four against one, with the one having not a chance for his alley. Though it might have been just the other way around, the Triangle Bar doing the shooting, a Broken Circle M man the victim. Yet, it was murder!"

Said Abe Connors, "Those two loco outfits are making a slaughterhouse out of our town."

"It is the kind of news which travels far," Buck Handy growled. "And it lures the blacklegs, the tinhorns, the gunthrowers and all the rest of the worthless riff-raff. Take those two outfits. On the one hand, we got Buzz and Slide McCabe; on the other, Stud Darwin. The Broken Circle M and the Triangle Bar. Not big outfits, not good outfits, not sound outfits. Haywire layouts, both. Together they don't get out one really worth-while shipping herd a year.

"They ain't really interested in raising cows, by the looks of things. Just in hell-raising. Sore at one another, both sides taking on gunhands instead of cowhands. First thing we know they'll be involving some of the reputable layouts here about. They can throw the whole range into a shootin' war. It's happened other places; it can happen here. Which is hell for everybody. So we got to do something about it!"

This was a long speech for Buck Handy to make. Usually he was markedly chary of words. Which showed the depth of his feelings in the matter.

"What can we do?" asked Henry Caldwell, a good man and a sound one, but inclined to caution.

"Call 'em together, maybe," suggested Pete Evans. "Get the McCabes and Stud Darwin to meet along with us and iron the whole thing out peaceful-like."

"Not a bad suggestion at all," nodded Doc Terwilliger. "One well worth trying, I believe. What do you think, Charlie?"

Charlie Lott shrugged. "No harm in trying."

"It won't work," grunted Buck Handy. "I've seen it tried before, in my time. Buzz and Slide McCabe fancy themselves as a pair of tough ones. Stud Darwin would have you believe he wears barb-wired underclothes. Only one language they understand, that breed. Knock hell out of 'em."

"I'm inclined to side with Buck there," drawled Abe Connors. "Yet, if there's a peaceful way out, I'm for it."

Doc Terwilliger looked at Buck Handy. "If we could be unanimous in this—"

Buck hunched his gaunt shoulders. "I won't kick, even if I say again, it won't work."

"It is decided, then," said Doc Terwilliger. "I will make all arrangements. I will let you know when the time and place is set."

"Ben Spann will want to be in on this," suggested Charlie Lott.

"He will be," said Doc. "I'll see to that."

THE McCabes came into Mesabe full of wary suspicion. They were small, dark, wiry men, with thin, bleak faces, restless, catlike, dangerous. Doc Terwilliger met them at the hotel steps.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "Come along inside and make yourselves at home."

"If this is some kind of a trap," said Slide McCabe in a voice dry and toneless and vicious, "You'll die with two gunloads of lead in your belly, Terwilliger."

"Make it four gunloads, Slide," droned Buzz.

"I gave you my word," reminded Doc Terwilliger gently. "And my word is something I do not lightly toss about."

They followed him in, spur chains scuffling, their black eyes darting, watching, suspicious. In the hotel parlor were the old men of Mesabe. There was a bottle and glasses. The McCabes took theirs neat, tossing the liquor down with single gulps. Then they sat where they could watch windows and doors, built cigarettes and smoked in silence.

Ten minutes later Stud Darwin rode in. With him was his foreman, Bert Klowans. He had refused to come unless he could bring a man with him so he would not be outnumbered when he faced the McCabe brothers.

Stud Darwin was a bull of a man, his face square and knotted, eyes protuberant and aggressive, his voice loud and offensive. Terwilliger met him and Klowans with the same quiet dignity. Darwin voiced the same suspicion the McCabes had shown.

"If you're trying to pull a fast one, Terwilliger—"

"I gave you my promise," said Doc. "That should be sufficient."

Darwin laughed coarsely. "I put my faith in these." He slapped his guns.

A taut and deadly tension lay across the room when Darwin and the McCabes faced each other. The hatred, the avid lust for each other's blood, were so real and virulent, Buck Handy slid something out from behind his chair and laid it across his knees. It was a sawed-off shotgun. Buck let one hand play about the locks.

"I brought this along," he growled, "jest as a little insurance that you hombres behave yourselves. Either of you start anything, he gets it. All right, Doc—get your meeting in order. We're all here."

Buzz McCabe stirred restlessly. "That's right. Say your say, Terwilliger."

"Briefly, it is this," said Doc gravely. "The Triangle Bar and the Broken Circle M are at war. Like all wars, in the end everybody loses. My friends and I, here in Mesabe, would like to see this thing stopped, now—and any differences settled by verbal agreement."

Slide McCabe said sneeringly, "What did I tell you, Buzz? A lot of mealy-mouthed guff by a lot of sanctimonious old roosters. We're wasting our time."

Stud Darwin stared at Doc Terwilliger. "Is that what you brought me and Bert all the way in from the ranch for? To try and sell us on the idea of getting along friendly with a nest of murderin' snakes? Why, you damned old fool!"

A gleam came into Doc Terwilliger's mild old eyes. "Let me remind you, Darwin—and you, Buzz and Slide McCabe—that this bloody feud you are engaged in hurts many outside your own outfits. Oh, not directly, perhaps, but it hurts them just the same. And it is a hurt you have no right to inflict. The interests of these others must be safeguarded. What do you propose to do about that angle?"

Slide McCabe got to his feet. "This is getting sillier by the minute. Let's go, Buzz."

"Sit down!" rumbled Buck Handy. "Doc ain't through, yet."

Slide looked at Buck's sawed-off slaughter gun and sat down.

Stud Darwin bawled, "The only thing I ever did or ever will agree with a McCabe on is that our little mix-up is none of your damn business, Terwilliger. Or of any of the rest of you old goats sittin' around here."

Buck Handy said, "You see, Doc? Was I right?"

Doc Terwilliger nodded, a little sadly. "You were right, Buck." Doc stared at the floor for a moment, then his head came up. "Very well, Darwin—and you McCabes—you have had your say. Now I, on behalf of my old friends here, will have mine—and theirs.

"The town of Mesabe is heartily sick and tired of the murdering lot of you. Henceforth, you'll stay out of it—you and all who ride for you. Your money is no good at any establishment in this town. The doors of all those same establishments are closed to you and your men. Do I make myself clear, gentlemen?"

STUD DARWIN'S bulgy eyes protruded even more. He dropped a heavy forefinger, pointing at Doc's chest. "You mean to say that neither I nor any of my men can come into Mesabe?" he bellowed.

"I mean just that," said Doc.

Darwin threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "Suppose," he wheezed, "suppose we come anyhow? Just what do you intend to do about it?"

"Something you will find out," Doc told him curtly.

"That goes for Broken Circle M riders, too?" droned Buzz McCabe.

"It does."

"You'll see," snapped Buzz. "Come on, Slide."

They went out, watchful, catlike, dangerous. Buck Handy let them go. And when the tattoo of their horses' hoofs had faded, Buck waved his shotgun.

"You can git now, Darwin. You and Klowans. Better believe what Doc just told you. You were invited in here, fair and decent, for a square-cut talk on how to straighten out your troubles by some other means than gunsmoke. You've showed as a flock of knot-headed fools. Fair talk is wasted on the lot of you. You fancy yourselves as tough guys. You're due to find out what tough really means. On your way!"

Stud Darwin leered, laughed sarcastically and swaggered out, with Bert Klowans at his heels.

Doc Terwilliger looked around the room. "We tried, gentlemen," he said quietly. "Our consciences are clear. Yes, Buck Handy was right. We must adopt other and more direct means. We will discuss those means, now."

And so they talked, for a full hour, trading ideas and suggestions. Behind each one of them lay long years of experience with turbulent frontier life. Each had survived those years because of a common gift of courage, longheadedness and an innate decency. Theirs were the qualities which endured. Under their grizzled thatches lay wisdom, hard won.

They came, at length, to common decision and agreement. On this they had one final drink, then scattered to their respective places of business. The old men of Mesabe were ready.

Two days later three riders jogged into town. They were Broken Circle M men. They rode close bunched and ready. They carried their guns, tied down. Each had a Winchester rifle in a saddle scabbard. They were wary, but arrogant, plainly sent in by the McCabes to call what the McCabes figured was a bluff by Doc Terwilliger and his friends.

Pete Evans' blacksmith shop was at the edge of town, just beyond the livery barn. Any who rode into town from the upper end must pass Pete's shop and be seen from there. Except on the rare occasions when the south wind was blowing, the mellow clanger of Pete's hammer on anvil carried all over town. It was clanging now. Three evenly spaced clangs, a pause while a man might count ten, then three more. Several times this cadence of sound was repeated.

Over in his hotel, Doc Terwilliger heard it. He went to a front window and looked out. From a cupboard behind the register desk Doc brought out a carbine, levered a cartridge into the chamber. Then he went back to the window, edging it slightly open.

Ben Spann, cleaning stalls in his livery barn, set aside his pitchfork. He lifted an old Henry saddle gun down off a hook, grabbed a handful of cartridges

from a shelf. Moving out to the door of the stable, he stood just far enough back to be shielded by the warm, inner gloom of the place. Other men, Charlie Lott, Abe Connors, Buck Handy, Henry Caldwell, hearing the signal tolling off Pete Evans' anvil, made swift preparation.

The three Broken Circle M riders rode the full length of the street and halfway back, before dismounting and tying in front of the Sunset Saloon. With a final look around, they started to enter, and found themselves looking into the twin tunnels of Buck Handy's sawed-off shotgun.

"You won't be stopping here, gents," growled Buck. "You're the wrong breed, pack the wrong brand. So move along!"

They were a little startled, the three were. Then seeing that Buck was alone, they began to threaten and bluster.

Buck said, "The McCabes had their chance to talk a couple of days ago. They didn't want to, then. So it's no good trying to, now. Move on!"

THERE was an open window a few feet past Buck's door. One of the riders made as if to move on, as Buck had ordered. The other two lingered to argue. That first rider went only as far as the window. Here he flattened against the wall, drew a gun and started to push it through the window.

Doc Terwilliger, his hotel just across the street from the Sunset, saw and understood. He pulled down fine with his carbine and cut loose. The report of the carbine was thin and whiplike. The rider at the window, a leg knocked out from under him, came down all asprawl, cursing his surprise and pain.

The other two whirled to face the street, reaching for guns. Then Buck Handy's voice rasped at them in stony remorselessness.

"You both got just five seconds to drop them guns and get your hands up —high. That, or in five seconds I shoot —both barrels!"

They made up their minds in half the time. Their guns clattered to the board sidewalk, their arms went up. And now, from this doorway and that came quiet, grizzled men, all with a weapon of some sort.

Buck Handy said to Abe Connors, "Search 'em, Abe. They may have a hideout gun."

Abe nodded and turned up a derringer from one, a knife from another. Doc Terwilliger was standing over the wounded one.

"I could have killed you," he said gravely. "Maybe I should have. Behave yourself and I'll look at that leg."

There was little fight left in them, only a short bit of bluster from one. "Wait until Buzz and Slide hear of this. They'll give you what for."

"That will be interesting," growled Buck Handy.

They took them over and locked them in a secure room in a corner of Henry Caldwell's warehouse. The wounded one, his leg taken care of by Doc Terwilliger, was given a pile of blankets to lie on.

"Your fines for disturbing the peace," Doc Terwilliger told them, "will be one hundred dollars per man. When the McCabes are ready to pay that fine and further guarantee that the town of Mesabe will not be bothered with you again, you'll be released, not before."

They gathered for a moment in Henry Caldwell's office.

Buck Handy said, "The McCabes sent those three in for a trial. They probably had orders not to stick around town very long, just long enough to consider they'd called our bluff. When they don't show up pretty pronto, we'll hear more from the McCabes. Everybody on his toes and listen close to the sound of Pete's hammer."

It was midafternoon before Pete Evans' hammer began that cadence of three, a pause, then three more. This time it was a single rider. He rode straight down the middle of the street, carrying no visible weapon. Doc Terwilliger stepped out onto the hotel porch. The rider saw him, edged over and stopped.

"Where," he demanded, "are Gus Riggs, Lee Skaggs and Slim Walker?"

"Locked up," said Doc tersely. "It is Walker, I believe, who has the shot-up leg. They will stay as they are until the McCabes pay a fine of a hundred dollars per man and guarantee that Mesabe will no longer be afflicted by their presence. That was the news you came to get, I suppose."

The rider nodded surlily as he reined around. "I'll probably be back, pronto,"

he growled. "Buzz and Slide will have plenty of answer for you."

At sundown the rider was back, unarmed as before. His message was blunt. "Buzz said to tell you that if those three men weren't at the Broken Circle M, with their guns and horses, by seven o'clock tonight, we're coming after them. And somebody will get hurt."

"Somebody undoubtedly will," agreed Doc dryly.

The rider cursed and spurred away. Doc made the rounds to report. Abe Connors said, "With you taking the lead this way, Doc, they'll center on you. And that's hardly fair to you. We're all in this, you know—up to our ears."

"I know," Doc nodded cheerfully. "I'm not worrying any. I doubt they'll go too far, yet. The Broken Circle M will probably show up in force and try to bluster their way through. It won't work."

Abe shook his head slowly. "I dunno about those McCabes. In their way, they're poison. Suppose they come a-shootin'?"

Doc's eyes flashed. "Then they will get a rough handling."

BY THE time Doc had made the rounds and let everybody in on the know, dusk had fallen. Walking slowly back to his hotel, Doc thought that a town like Mesabe was at its best, just at dusk. Warm lights beginning to glow in window and open door, the time of day when a man gathered his family about him and knew his deepest comfort and contentment.

Only Doc didn't have a family. All he had was his circle of old friends, and his town. Funny he should feel that way, as though everybody in Mesabe were his family, and that somehow he was responsible for their security and happiness. Maybe that was because he had so long been a part of Mesabe, had seen it struggle up from a crossroads to the dignity and stature of a town.

It was part of him, Mesabe was, and he owed much to it. For, though he had given much in return, here had he spent the best part of his life. There were obligations, as Doc saw it, that a man owed to his community, just like he owed them to his native land. Obligations not to be measured by dollars and cents, but obligations of service. That was it, an obligation of service.

On his own hook, Abe Connors made the rounds, too. And it was as he told Buck Handy, when he stopped in at the Sunset, "Doc's a proud old geezer, Buck. He's done the talking for us and so the McCabes will come at him first. When they do, we got to show 'em we're backing Doc to the limit."

Buck nodded decisively. "We'll show 'em. I had Charley Lott send me over a new Winchester and a passel of cartridges for it this afternoon."

Back in the hotel, Doc Terwilliger had one of his kitchen help heap a big tray with food and take it over to the warehouse for Henry Caldwell to give to the prisoners.

"Tell Henry I'll be over later on to take a look at that fellow's wounded leg," said Doc.

Back in the dusk a shadowy figure watched that delivery of food, watched where it went to. Then the watcher slid away into the night and presently, in the far distance, sounded the faint rattle of departing hoofs.

At eight o'clock, Doc Terwilliger went over to the warehouse. While Henry Caldwell watched with drawn gun, Doc examined the wounded Slim Walker and replaced the bandage.

"It's doing all right," said Doc. "It will hurt plenty for a while, but you'll have two sound legs under you again in time. Which makes you luckier than you deserve."

"You can't keep us locked up in this damn hole forever," snarled Lee Skaggs.

"Forever," remarked Doc cheerfully, "is a long, long time. We'll see."

When they went out and Henry Caldwell had snapped closed the big padlock, Henry said, "They'll keep, I reckon, without me sitting at that door all the time. I'm going over to Buck's place for a while."

"They'll keep," declared Doc.

Ben Spann and Pete Evans came in while Henry Caldwell was there. Buck Handy poured them each a drink, then said:

"You boys are more than welcome, of course, but tonight ain't like other nights. Should the McCabes come a'shootin—and they're liable to—we don't want 'em to trap us all cooped up in here. We want to be spread around so we can work on them.

So, Ben and Pete, you stick it out up at your end of the street. Don't go to bed too early and when you do, sleep light.

"Henry and me will hold things at this end. Then there's Charley and Abe and Doc to work up and down both sides of the middle. It should make a mighty smooth working surround, if the McCabes are fools enough to ride into the center of it and start trouble."

So Ben and Pete had their drinks and ambled off. They sat in Ben's living quarters in the livery barn and played cribbage at two bits a game.

In the parlor of his hotel, Doc Terwilliger balanced a steel-rimmed pair of spectacles on his hawkish nose and pored over an ancient, much thumbed volume of medical science. He was refreshing his knowledge about gunshot wounds.

IT WAS ten o'clock when the McCabes came up quietly behind the warehouse. They had four other riders with them. On foot and alone, Buzz McCabe circled the big, square-shouldered building.

When he came back he droned softly, "Caldwell ain't around. Loop, you sure you saw that grub be delivered here?"

"I'm damned sure," mumbled Loop.

"All right, we'll go in and look for the boys. Quiet, now! We don't want no shootin' done until we got Gus and Lee and Slim out of here. After that, if you see a head, blow it off. We'll show this damned town a thing or two."

They went in and, by trying every locked door they could see, they found the right one. A running-iron, brought from one of their saddles served to pry the hasp loose and then the prisoners were free. Supported on both sides, Slim Walker hobbled to one of the spare mounts brought along. They helped him into the leather.

Buzz McCabe said, "You get along to the ranch, Slim. The rest of us will be out later."

"While I'm in the saddle I'm just as good with one leg as two," rasped Walker. "Gimme a gun. I crave a chance to show Terwilliger that two can play a shootin' game. Only me, I ain't cuttin' down on his legs."

From the shadows, they stared up along the single street of Mesabe.

"It's quiet," muttered one of the riders. "Almost too quiet. Like a trap."

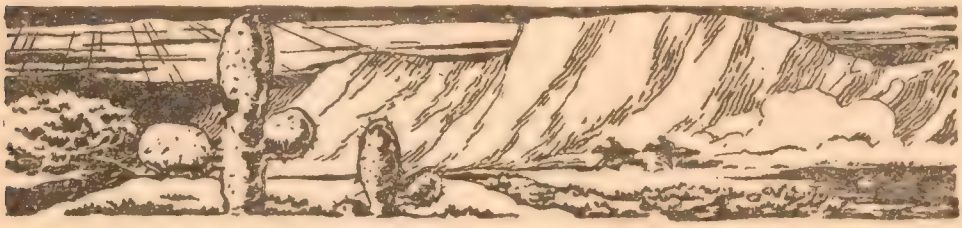
Slide McCabe laughed wickedly. "We'll wake 'em up. Where first, Buzz?"

"The hotel. I want to shove this whole thing right down Terwilliger's throat. Come on!"

They rode out in a group, keeping in the center of the street where the shadows were heaviest. The doorway of Abe Connors' saddle shop was black. It was an old building with a deep casement. Abe liked to sit there of an evening in the dark and suck at his old briar pipe. He was squatted there now, unseen, and he saw that group ride by.

Abe reached around through the open door behind him and brought out a rifle. He stuffed his pipe in his pocket and moistened his lips. He saw the group come to a halt before the hotel, saw the small, catlike figure of one of the McCabes swing down and dart up the steps. Then Abe put two fingers in his mouth and whistled piercingly, three times.

The sound of that whistle and its import cut through Doc Terwilliger's absorption in his medical book. He dropped the book, caught up the carbine leaning beside his chair. Levering a shell into the chamber, he started for the door, gun half leveled.



Outside, the answer to that whistle was a yell of alarm and a shot. Then, gliding in to face Doc Terwilliger came Buzz McCabe, eyes wicked, naked gun in his hand. His intent lay plain in his dark, twisted face. To see Doc waiting for him startled McCabe, threw him off stride for a split second. He stabbed out with his gun and Doc let him have it, full in th chest.

The smash of the rifle slug at sa

range was a blast which flung Buzz McCabe backwards, shaking him like an aspen leaf. McCabe tried desperately to get off his shot, but the life wouldn't stay in him long enough. He fell half in, half out of the hotel door.

Doc jumped over him and then to one side, crouched low against the dark outer wall.

A rider in the group yelled desperately, "I knew it was a trap! I knew it!"

Slide McCabe had seen his brother die. He went crazy, standing in his saddle, rolling both guns, slashing lead all along the front of the hotel.

Abe Connors bought in, levering his shots in mechanical cadence, with that whole dark group as a target. A rider went out of his saddle, swiftly, silently, as though he'd been hit with a sledge hammer. The rest broke, then, spurring wildly up the street, shooting blindly from side to side.

Slide McCabe did not want to go, but his horse, fretting wildly, broke and ran with the rest. But now, from the stable door, black and yawning, they ran into more gunfire. Some of it was the flat thud of Ben Spann's ancient Henry carbine, the rest the deep, thunderous boom of Pete Evans' Sharps rifle. Over at the store, from a darkened window, Charley Lott was working a Winchester. Down at the Sunset, Buck Handy and Henry Caldwell peppered at the fleeing heels of the McCabe contingent.

The shooting of Pete Evans and Ben Spann scattered and turned the disorganized Broken Circle M riders. Mounted men were spurring in every direction about the street, trying to find a loophole to break through. Slide McCabe, emerging from his first wild frenzy, yelled savagely, trying to get his crowd organized into some sort of effective fighting force.

UP AT THE livery barn Pete Evans shoved another long, deadly cartridge into the reeking chamber of his Sharps rifle. He took a blind shot in the general direction of Slide McCabe's mad yelling. The lethal, whining slug hit Slide McCabe just below the line of his hatbrim.

Disorganized before and doubly so now that Slide's shouts were silenced, the remaining riders had no thought but to get out of this sleepy little town of Mesabe which had become, for one terrible minute, the epitome of all retribution. Here and there they found an alleyway and fled up it blindly, racing for the sanctuary of the open range beyond. And presently they were all gone. The street grew quiet and the old men of Mesabe began to count the extent of their victory . . . .

It was midmorning of the next day. Mesabe looked completely normal, except, if one examined closely there were bullet holes and gouges to be found on various walls, with here and there a splintered windowpane.

Stud Darwin and Bert Klowans came riding, Darwin with an arm high, open palm forward, in the age old Indian peace sign. By the time they were well down street, Pete Evans' hammer was beating a familiar cadence. And suddenly, so it seemed to Darwin and Klowans, there were armed men in almost every doorway they looked at, grim, grizzled, purposeful old men.

Doc Terwilliger, carbine leveled at his hip, stepped out onto the hotel porch. "Talk fast," said Doc bleakly.

Much of Stud Darwin's swagger and arrogance was missing. He said, "I understand the lid blew off last night."

"It blew," said Doc. "Is that what you came here to say?"

Doc's manner and words might have been a wind blowing off a glacier. Stud Darwin licked his lips.

"I hear the McCabes went under. Well, that closes out the trouble. Without them in my hair I can get along with anybody."

Doc shook his head. "Not with anybody in Mesabe, Darwin. What we did was not done to iron out any of your troubles, or to take sides for or against anyone. It merely happened that the McCabes tried to call what they chose to term our bluff before you got around to it. Had you tried it first you'd have been where they are now. You and your crowd are not a bit better than they were. You are still not wanted in Mesabe. You never will be. You and yours will stay out of this town from now on. And we're not bluffing, Darwin."

Stud Darwin swallowed heavily. "But this is the only town within a hundred miles of here. I got business to do here. I got to have supplies, grub, mail. My riders have to have some place to go—"

"It won't be in Mesabe," cut in Doc remorselessly. "You had your chance, as did the McCabes, to meet us fair and

friendly. You chose to scoff and sneer. We don't like you, Darwin. You'll stay out of Mesabe or take the consequences."

Darwin's bulgy eyes became congested. He began to rage. "You can't do this—"

Doc's carbine jumped to his shoulder. "Get down, both of you! Don't try for a gun. You see I'm not alone. Get down and march, over to the livery barn."

Darwin and Klowans got down and marched. Darwin argued over his shoulder. "We came in peaceful, Bert and me and—"

"You'll leave peaceful, too—if you're wise," Doc told him. "I'm just going to show you something. March!"

They closed in behind Doc—Abe Connors, Buck Handy, and Charlie Lott. Henry Caldwell came hurrying to join them. At the stable was Ben Spann, his old Henry rifle ready.

"Pull those blankets aside and let them have a look, Ben," ordered Doc. "Nothing to scare a live coyote like the sight of a dead one."

There were four blankets to be removed. Doc said stonily, "Both the McCabes, Slim Walker, and Loop Marcus. The penalty of trying to tell the decent citizens of Mesabe their business. Convinced?"

Darwin licked his lips again. "But it means I'll have to sell out, get clear off this range, if I can't come into Mesabe any more."

"You're lucky to have that chance," Doc told him.

Bert Klowans blurted, "Plenty of other range I can ride beside this one."

"Make plans to ride it, then," growled Buck Handy.

"I aim to," said Klowans. "Stud, I ain't putting any money of mine behind the hand you hold. It's a busted flush. You might as well realize it."

Stud Darwin nodded. "Give me a month?" he asked of Doc. "I don't want to have to give my layout away."

"A month," Doc nodded. "Not one day more."

Stud Darwin and Bert Klowans rode out of Mesabe, for the last time. Doc Terwilliger nodded toward the still figures under the blankets:

"There are last rites to be performed, gentlemen. After which we can resume living where we left off. Any regrets?"

There were none.

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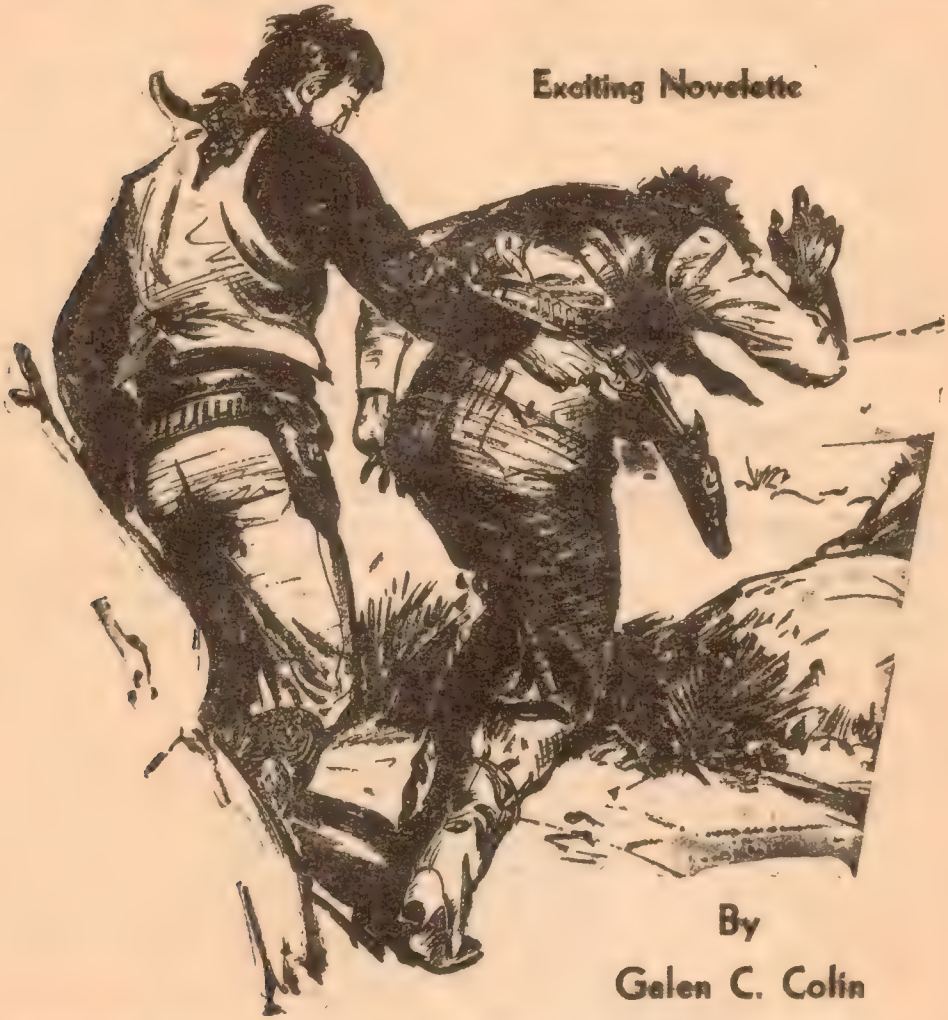
# Two Against a Buzzard Brood

Exciting Novelette



By

Galen C. Colin

*Buzzards were on the wing that night when the younker kept watch over a drygulched puncher. But carrion collectors were as nothing compared to the six-gun scavengers waiting to make them pistol prey.*

CHAPTER I

THE sun poked above the eastern horizon and flung the long, crooked shadow of the Joshua tree almost to the boy's toes. He did not move, as the shadow reached out toward him. He still crouched there beside the spindly mesquite, toes deep in the sand, arms clasped around his thin legs, chin on his knees.

The sun climbed slowly higher. The shadow writhed back like a sluggish, full-bellied snake. He watched it disappear, inch at a time, up the thick gray-green trunk, and he was almost surprised that it did not leave a track in

the sand where it had crawled.

He opened his red-rimmed eyes just a little wider, as the shadow slithered down from the face of the man who lay sprawled on his back in the sand. But still the boy did not change his position. He had crouched there all night, stirring only once or twice. Then he had taken a hesitant step toward the shapeless heap on the sand, each time dropping back on his heels.

Numbing grief and fear held him tightly. They dulled his brain and paralyzed his muscles. In his fourteen years he had known something of death—had seen it intimately when his father and mother died. But the violent kind that had swept the lonely sand and mesquite that last day was new to him.

And twice he had seen that ruthless violence strike. It left him helpless and terribly lonely. There was nothing he could do—no thoughts he could think straight—no hope that he could cling to. All that was left was waiting — waiting with the dread patience of the very young or the very old. Waiting through the long, fearsome hours of night until the equally fearsome hours of day began.

The man in the sand had not been dead last night when darkness settled down over the tangle. He had heard a low moan then, that mingled with the moan of the wind through the clutching fingers of the mesquite. But that had been hours ago.

Now that strong face looked set and lifeless. There was a smear of blood, dried and black, across the broad forehead and down over the high cheekbone. The wide mouth was fixed in a grimace that showed white, even teeth. The clenched hands and the sprawling legs seemed hard with the rigor of death.

The boy drew a long, half-sobbing sigh, as the sun cast a slash of gold across the high-bridged nose, and touched the purplish closed eyelids. The man was dead now—the boy had no doubt of that. But death was no more terrible than the vast loneliness that engulfed him. He felt as if he cowered in the very center of an empty world.

He straightened his legs slowly, scarcely noticing the stiffness of his knees from hunkering motionless for so long. Standing, he could see a little farther. But there was nothing to see, except more mesquite and twisted cactus clear to the horizon.

A NARROW trail twisted its tortuous way through the tangle, winding between the boy and the body of the man. But each end of the trail disappeared into nothingness. He looked in both directions. He knew what was to the east, for he had come over that trail —a full thousand miles of it.

The other way looked exactly the same, except for the purple haze of a range of mountains far in the distance. What lay between him and those mountains he could not even guess. Again he squatted in the sand, and turned his eyes to the motionless figure. Not with hope, or even fear now. But in grim despair. The only being in the vast circle of the silent land, as far as he knew—and dead.

But now his thin body stiffened. He caught his breath sharply, and his teeth closed on his dry, cracked lips. His eyes blinked, and he shook his head as if to clear them of something. It must have been a moving shadow that brought the illusion of movement to that set face. It couldn't be—

But now he saw it again. And this time he could not be mistaken. Those swollen purple lids quivered ever so slightly, as if the sun burned the eyeballs beneath. For a full ten minutes he watched, not so much as moving a finger. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the lids had opened the tiniest crack, until the boy thought he could see the thin black streak of eye beneath them.

He still could not believe it. The man could not be alive. It was all more of the nightmare that had terrorized him since the afternoon before. But now he saw the unmistakable quiver of a leg—saw the hands open and clench again with a spasmodic jerk.

If he had been frightened before, he was frozen with fear now. Terror that gripped him by the throat—the terror of the supernatural—of seeing a dead man move. His hands tightened where they clenched in front of his shins, until the knuckles were white. His eyes were wide and unblinking.

Now those thick, cracked lips moved as if the man was trying to speak. But no sounds came. The eyes were half open, and he could see the eyeballs roll-

ing. It seemed as if they were staring sightlessly at him.

Minute by minute the movements became stronger. The legs straightened. One broad hand came up jerkily to shield the eyes from the sun. In that grim moment the boy was fascinated by the thick black hair on the back of that hand.

The man was struggling to rise now, while the boy stared unbelievingly. Mumbled sounds came from the thick lips. Knees bent, and booted heels dug into the sand. At last, with an explosive grunt and a great heave, the man rolled over onto his face.

His arms bent, and his big hands spread themselves on the sand. Slowly, inch by inch, he forced his body up until it left the hollow it had made in the sand. The blood-smeared face with the wild eyes was turned toward the hunkering boy.

A hollow laugh that was more terrible than a curse came from those parched lips. The words that followed were thick and barely intelligible.

"You—buzzard—sittin' over there—with your claws an' your beak—honin' for a hunk of my flesh! I fooled you—you're goin' to miss your feed! I ain't—"

THAT croaking voice brought the boy from the hypnosis of fear that had held him motionless. His head jerked up from his knees. His hands loosed their grip from around his shins, and he wriggled his fingers to rid them of the gnawing ache.

He straightened his thin legs and rose shakily, his wide eyes still upon the man. He took a staggering step toward the prone figure, hope and fear equally strong in his breast. Again that croaking voice.

"You're not a—buzzard! You've got no—claws an' no beak—no feathers! Not a coyote—for you're walking on two feet! Been watchin' you for hours—for days—thinkin' you was a stinkin' carrion buzzard—waitin' for me to die! What are you?"

The boy moved closer now, his legs shaking with fear beneath him. His dry tongue tried to wet his dry lips, but only deepened the cracks. Twice he tried to speak before the rasping voice, high-pitched and thin, came.

"I'm—Elisha Hosea Carter. I'm not a buzzard—an' you couldn't have been watchin' me for days. You only been there yest'day afternoon an' las' night."

The man heaved again, and with a mighty effort swung his body around and came to a sitting position on the sand. For a moment he swayed there, and the boy held his breath as he watched. The man planted his hands on each side of him, and leaned a little toward the boy.

Twice he shook his head as if to clear his bleary eyes and his hazy brain. But now the mad look was fading. He even tried a grin which turned out a crooked grimace.

"Elisha — Hosea — Carter. Quite a handle—to fasten on a spindly younker like you. What you doin'—away out here in the mesquite?"

The boy moved toward the man with hesitant feet. Then he dropped on his heels again, and his elbows rested on his knees. No more than five feet from the sitting figure, he stared into the man's eyes.

"I saw 'em—kill my grandpop—an' saw 'em gun you."

The boy's words came with hardly any inflection. The expression on his face did not change. He had been drained too completely of emotion for any to be left for his simple statement.

For just an instant, too, the man's face held stiff and set. Then slowly the bushy brows drew together in a frown. His cracked lips tightened over his teeth. His right hand lifted from the sand and moved instinctively toward his hip, only to come away when he realized that his gunbelt and filled holster were gone.

"So that's what happened! Somebody gunned me from behind." His hand went shakily to his head now. "Creased me, I reckon. Must have figured I was plumb dead. Took my gun—likely everything else on me."

The boy nodded. "I didn't get close enough to hear 'em, but they did search you. An' they tied yore horse to the back of the wagon when they drove off."

The man leaned a little toward the boy. "You saw 'em? But you didn't know 'em, huh?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't know, Mister. There was two men. Killed my grandpop back down the road a piece, before they shot you. Buried him in the sand."

The man licked his dry lips. "My head feels as big as a barrel—an' I shore could use a drink of water. Don't happen to have a jug with you? Well, never mind. Go ahead an' tell me about it. Who was your grandpop? An' why did they kill him?"

"Grandpop was Amos Alonzo Carter. An' there wasn't no reason for them killin' him."

"Amos Alonzo Carter—don't sound like no range name I ever heard."

"We come from Union County in Missouri," the boy said slowly. "When mom an' pop died, me an' grandpop was all alone. We hitched Tom an' Nelly to the covered wagon, an' headed West. Grandpop 'lowed the West was the place for a boy to grow up."

"Mebbe he was right," the man grunted. "But it was shore bad medicine for him. But how about the killin'? How did it happen?"

"A couple of men rode up alongside the wagon. I was sleepin' in the back, an' didn't get a good look at 'em. It was their talk that woke me up. Then I heerd the shot, an' grandpop tumbled back off the seat. One of the men laughed—an' then they tied their horses alongside Nelly an' Tom, an' climbed into the wagon."

"Yeah—but you? How come they didn't drill you, too?"

"I dropped out of the back where the endgate was down—without them seein' me. Hid behind a bush until they drove off. I follered, but I couldn't get a look at their faces. Then I saw 'em shoot you. I didn't go no further. That was nigh sundown las' night."

## CHAPTER II

THE man nodded. The explanation had been short and to the point. "So I been layin' in the sand for goin' on twelve hours, huh? Feel like it, too."

Then he looked at the boy out of bleary eyes again. "You didn't sound none too certain when you said you didn't recognize the killers, son. Shore it wasn't someone you know—an' for some reason you ain't tellin'?"

For a full minute the boy did not answer. His brow was furrowed, and his eyes were staring with intense concentration. When he did speak, it was in hesitant words.

"They looked—sort o' like—a couple of men we saw back in the feed-yard at the las' town—Lorber, I think it was. But like I told you, I didn't see their faces in the wagon."

"An' you think they might have follered you, huh? Was there any reason? Did your grandpop have any words with 'em, or did he flash a roll of bills—or somethin'?"

The boy shook his head. "Grandpop never quarreled with nobody in his life. An' a big roll—you mean—"

"If the ol' man was flashin' a roll, it might have been the reason—"

"Grandpop did have nigh five thousand dollars onto him. He sold off ever'thing, when mom an' pop died. Ever'thing, excep' Tom an' Nelly an' the wagon. But he didn't flash the money. Might have been in sight for a minute when he paid the feed-yard bill. I don't know."

The man's iron strength was returning, even though his lips and tongue were becoming thicker and drier with every second. At last he heaved himself to his feet. He stood shakily, with feet widespread, and a look of dizzy pain swept his face.

"Talkin' ain't gettin' us nowheres, son. We're here on our own, without a horse or a gun or any water or grub. Don't reckon you know the country. Likely as much a stranger as I am. Wouldn't know where there was a waterhole or a place to get a bait of grub."

"Ain't never been here before," the youngster answered. "But grandpop 'lowed we'd make Railley late las' night. Mebbe three-four hours drivin'. An' we're a little closer. Reckon Railley mus' be a right smart good town."

"Must be a heap different from any of these here dry-country towns I've hit, then," the man grunted. "But anyhow there'll be water an' grub. Let's get to movin'."

"You're sure you think you can walk, Mister? That gouge onto your head—"

"Jest a gouge," the man grunted. "Been hurt a heap worse many's the time. I'll make it—if I don't starve to death."

Now he glanced around the spot again, as if to satisfy himself that all his possessions really were gone. Then he moved with shuffling steps to the twist-

ing trail through the mesquite, and headed west.

The boy trudged at his side. For a hundred yards they were silent, but the youngster studied the tall, broad-shouldered man. For some reason he trusted the stranger, trusted and liked him. He wondered where he was from—what brought him to this country—wondered what was ahead of the pair of them.

And the man must have sensed what was going through the boy's mind. For he half turned toward the youngster, and gave him a twisted smile that was more than half grimace.

"Elisha Hosea Carter, huh? What do they call you? Not that whole name, I hope."

"Lish, mostly. Mom used to call me all of it, when she was a little put out at me. But mostly it was just Lish."

The man grinned again. "Lish is good enough for me, son. An' me, I'm Laramie Wyman. Come from Wyoming on account of a special job that has to be done. Reckon you an' me jus' as well team up. Ain't no bargain for either one of us, but likely our trail will be runnin' side by side for quite a spell."

The boy drew a long breath of relief. "That suits me, Laramie, until we meet up with the men who—who killed my grandpop. Then I aim to—"

"Whoa up, feller," the man grunted. "I've got as much stake in meetin' 'em as you have. They gunned me, too, an' took my horse an' guns. An' the sizable roll I was carryin'."

The boy nodded soberly. "Yeah, I reckon you have."

NOW they gave their whole attention to forcing their dragging feet along the sandy trail. The sun beat down with searing intensity, and their thirst grew unbearable. Everything became shimmery and unreal before Lish Carter's eyes, and he could see that Laramie Wyman was staggering like a drunken man. They did not try to talk—and just as well, for their thick tongues filled their mouths.

A dozen times in the next four miles they saw what looked like little lakes ahead of them. They would hurry their steps, only to find the mirages fading beneath their feet.

More times than they cared to count, ahead of them appeared to be riders approaching—or buildings huddled between them and the shimmering horizon—or moving herds along the crest of some low dune. Each time they were disappointed.

And so it was that when the little town of Railley suddenly loomed in front of them, they did not feel the faintest tinge of excitement. Laramie Wyman's thick lips moved in a wordless curse. Lish Carter's red-rimmed eyes did not widen or brighten.

It was just another mirage. A mirage that would not trick him into wasting precious strength in useless hurrying. A mirage that would not excite him with false hope of cool water, of rest and food. He'd keep trudging on as long as he could move one foot in front of the other. Then he'd lie down and die.

Even when they staggered out of the broiling sun into the actual shadow of the huge livery barn, they did not allow themselves to believe. Intinctively they moved a little closer to each other. They eyed each other, looking for a sign of the same illusion.

Laramie Wyman's dry lips moved as he tried to voice a question. Lish Carter understood, even though no words came. He moved a little ahead of Laramie, and touched the weathered slabs with a hesitant hand. He looked back at the big man, and nodded.

Together, they moved around the corner of the rickety old barn. The straggling town, with its drab, false-fronted buildings and ramshackle shacks spread out in front of them. The trail, which widened slightly to make the main street, bent around the barn.

To their sun-scorched, sand-reddened eyes, Railley looked hardly more than a shimmering haze. The two or three moving men on the humpy sidewalks were mere moving blots in the brilliant light.

But the long wooden trough, spilling over from cool water that trickled from the end of a pipe, was no mirage. And the creak of the old windmill on its spraddling tower was not the moan of the wind through the mesquite.

Laramie Wyman looked at Lish Carter. The boy answered the stare. Then both staggered at a half-run to the trough. They plunged their faces deep into it. When the water had cooled their burning brains a little, when they had drunk sparingly, they straightened and turned.

WA

A tall, incredibly thin old man, with a sparse and straggly mustache and twinkling little black eyes, faced them. He stood with his feet wide apart, knobby fists on his hips close to his filled holsters. A smile that held no hint of humor played across the thin lips beneath the mustache.

"Hi'yuh, strangers. Wasn't lookin' for you to show up. Figgered the buzzards was pickin' your bones."

LARAMIE WYMAN licked his lips, found that his tongue had lost some of its stiffness. But his voice, when he spoke at last, was still raspy.

"Them words need a little explainin', Mister."

The tall man moved a step closer. "Didn't figger you was in the land of the livin'—not any. Not when Buck Gaffney an' Rod Lomax hit town late las' night, drivin' a team to a covered wagon an' leadin' a strange hoss from the north country."

Laramie Wyman felt his senses clearing from the cool water, felt the strength returning to his whipcord body. And for the first time in hours, what had happened out in the mesquite assumed real importance.

"You know what happened then? You know who—"

"Whoa up, stranger. Don't know nothin'. Can only guess by what I see an' hear. Know the wagon an' team came from back East. Hosses wasn't branded. Know the saddled hoss came from the north range. Carryin' a double-cinch saddle with a long rope. Wyomin', or Montana, or some of them places."

"Go ahead!" Laramie Wyman's voice was low, but hard.

"I know Gaffney an' Lomax didn't come by them honest. Because I know them two pelicans—have for ten years. They wouldn't buy nothin' they could steal. An' anyway, they offered 'em to me too damn cheap."

Laramie Wyman nodded slowly. He shot a glance at Lish Carter, caught the wide-eyed look on the boy's face. Then back to the old liveryman.

"If you know that much, mebbe you can tell me where I can fin' them two gunslicks. I'm hopin' to meet up with 'em."

Still smiling crookedly, the tall old man turned and started toward the little office at the corner of the barn. "Come in an' set a spell, strangers. We'll make a little talk, whilst you're stowin' a bait of grub."

Laramie Wyman and Lish Carter followed eagerly. While they ate cold beef and beans and drank the scalding coffee, the old man talked. He'd been in Railley for twenty years, ever since a riding injury forced him to give up punching. And he didn't like the way things had been going lately. More especially, he didn't like Buck Gaffney and Rod Lomax—not any. Pair of crooks without conscience.

Nothing he could do, though. Buck Gaffney owned the hotel and bar, and controlled all the gambling in Railley. Rod Lomax had drifted up from below the line two years ago, and was thicker than molasses with Gaffney. Both of them trigger-quick killers.

Laramie Wyman nodded to himself. The old man had a quick mind, and a knack of putting things together. Plenty evidence of that was his appraisal of Wyman and Lish Carter. Looked honest, too. He looked the old man in the eyes.

"You read us right, Mister—"

"Tobin—Dan Tobin, is the name."

"You read us right, Tobin. Now I'm wonderin' if you've got a line on another waddy from up north. Slender, laughin' redhead. He was down this way three-four months ago."

Dan Tobin's little eyes were almost closed. For a moment he did not speak. Then he looked up at Laramie Wyman, and nodded slowly. "Don't recollect no redhead. But likely he was forkin' a Chain Lightnin' hoss, sort of a red roan with a white stockin' on its left forefoot."

"That was Dirk Braden's animal!" Laramie said eagerly. But Dirk, hisself—"

"Never seed the redhead," Tobin repeated. "But Buck Gaffney forks the Chain Lightnin' roan right frequent. Same brand as that black he brought in las' night."

FOR a full minute Wyman did not speak. But Lish Carter, who had been listening wide-eyed, saw his lips moving and his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. The boy moved closer and put his hand on Wyman's arm. The muscles were tense, and as hard as a boulder.

At last Laramie spoke, slowly, as if he voiced his thoughts aloud for his own ears. "I came down here on account of Dirk Braden. Carryin' two thousand dollars to help him out of trouble. Wrote his old man he had to have it to save his skin. The old man was right worried, an' me—why, Dirk's closer'n a brother to me."

Then he looked up at old Dan Tobin. "The letter Dirk wrote was sort of mixed up. Sort o' sounded like he wrote it at the p'int of a gun. Said somethin' about sendin' the money to the Dobe Dollar—whatever that is."

Dan Tobin's old eyes narrowed. "The Dobe Dollar! That's the place Buck Gaffney owns! Likely they forced this here young Braden to write the letter. An' then, figurin' that somebody'd bring the money instead of sendin' it, they waited an' drygulched you. Likely recognized the brand on your animal's flank. No doubt they gunned the boy's grandpop jest for the hell of it—an' what little they could rob him of."

Lish Carter was watching Laramie Wyman's face, as he listened to the old liveryman. And he was a little frightened at the killing rage he read there. He broke in softly. "You didn't tell me about the two thousand dollars, Laramie. Along with the five thousand they got from my grandpop, them polecats made a right good haul."

"Yeah! A good haul—an' probably figgerin' they'll get still more, when they tell Dirk the money didn't come. Ol' Jim Braden will spend every cent he's got for Dirk—an' figger it's cheap at the price. But they ain't goin' to get away with it. I'm collectin' from them two right sudden! I ain't heeled. They got my gun, along with everything else. But I'll tackle 'em barehanded!"

"Steady, feller!" Dan Tobin said evenly. "I could loan you a gun. Be glad to do it. But even then, you wouldn't have a chance. They're two against one—an' both plenty pizen with their six-guns."

Laramie Wyman smiled frostily. "I ain't so slow, Tobin. Might stack up pretty good—"

"An' they'd recognize you at sight," Dan Tobin continued. "Must have seed you plenty close whilst they were robbin' what they thought was your dead body. There wouldn't be a chance of gettin' the drop on 'em. Business they're in, they always have a lookout. Cagey as a pair of coyotes."

Laramie Wyman nodded reluctantly. He knew the logic of the old man's words. "But if I could only get 'em away from where they hang out, if I could only meet 'em on even terms—just two to one—"

"Not a chance," Tobin grunted. "They scarcely ever leave the Dobe Dollar. An' when they do, they keep their eyes peeled an' their hands on their holsters. Got everybody in town scared of 'em."

## CHAPTER III

LISH CARTER was listening, and wild thoughts took shape in his brain. He knew how it hurt Laramie to come to a dead end like this, how much effort it cost the puncher to fight down the impulse to face the two killers in their own hideout. But if he could lure them away—

He spoke up hesitantly. "But—they don't know me, Laramie. They never saw me. Don't know anybody else was in the wagon. I dropped out an' hid behind a clump of brush."

Dan Tobin blinked, peered at the slim boy. Apparently he read the desperate courage on the youngster's white face. A slow smile spread across his mustached lips.

"I admire your spunk for aimin' to go gunnin' for Gaffney an' Lomax. But they'd jest laugh at you. Wouldn't gun you, of course—for they wouldn't dare, even in Railley. Reckon the town would rise up against anyone who killed a younker your age. But you couldn't shoot 'em, either, not if they didn't draw on you."

"But I can handle a rifle-gun!" Lish broke in. "I've shot a squirrel out o' the top of a tree many's the time. An' a man's a heap bigger'n—"

Then it dawned upon him what old Dan Tobin had said—and meant. He realized its truth. He couldn't shoot a man who didn't dare shoot back. Not even if that man had killed his grandpop.

Dan Tobin moved toward him, put a skinny hand on his shoulder. "Jest set tight, son. We'll figger some way out of it, though I'll be damned if I see how right now. But any way you look at it, it's a man's job."

"It's my job, too! They killed my grandpop, took Tom an' Nelly an' the wagon—"

He stopped, and a funny look crept into his eyes. "Where are the team an' wagon, Mister Dan? You 'lowed Gaffney an' Lomax brought 'em in las' night."

The old man blinked. "What idea's buzzin' in your bonnet now? Reckon that team an' wagon are over at Gaffney's place, half mile beyond town. Couple of no-account sots live there, doin' what little work there is, an' watchin' things for Gaffney an' Lomax. But that don't mean nothin' in your young life. You can't—"

"Reckon Dirk Braden is there, too, huh? Likeliest place they'd keep him, whilst they tricked his father into payin' ransom money?"

Laramie Wyman jerked erect, as the boy mentioned Dirk Braden's name. And now Lish Carter turned toward him. "You'd better borrow that gun Dan Tobin promised you, Laramie. 'Cause Buck Gaffney an' Rod Lomax will likely be headin' this way hell-bent, right sudden."

"You're plumb locoed, boy! Some crazy idea—"

"No crazy idea, Laramie! I'm goin' to bring Gaffney an' Lomax down here to you, an' you better be ready. I'll be safe enough. They don't know me. An' anyhow, Dan Tobin said they wouldn't gun a boy."

"I'm not goin' to let you start off on no fool—"

But already Lish Carter had turned to Tobin again. The startling suddenness of his question brought the answer to the old man's lips.

"Just whereabouts is Gaffney's place, Mister Dan?"

"Half mile beyond the Dobe Dollar. Off to the left from the first turn beyond the Rancher's Supply Store. But you ain't aimin'—"

Before the words had left Dan Tobin's lips, Lish Carter was heading for the door. He stopped, half turned, and spoke once more to the two men standing open-mouthed.

"Your varmints will be along right sudden, Laramie. I'll bring 'em here, then it's up to you."

YOUNG Lish Carter walked from the livery stable with his back stiff and his shoulders squared. He knew that Laramie Wyman and Dan Tobin would be watching him from the window—knew that only the suddenness of it all had kept them from stopping him.

But his knees were strangely weak beneath him, and deep in his heart was grim fear. He had not forgotten—would never forget—the merciless cruelty of the men who had shot his unarmed grandfather, and laughed while the old man died.

Dan Tobin had said they would not dare to shoot an unarmed boy. But Lish Carter was none too sure of that. Gaffney and Lomax were ruthless and without conscience. And he didn't want to die. He had the healthy boy's dread of pain and death, intensified still more by his vivid imagination.

But he had his grandfather's courage, too—a courage that had driven the old man into a new country at an age when a man wants peace and quiet. And there was a fathomless well of bitter grief and anger to spur the boy on.

He reached the sidewalk that led down the east side of the street and past the Dobe Dollar. Other little false-fronted buildings were between him and the saloon, and the bigger Rancher's Supply Store was on beyond.

He passed only two men before he reached the Dobe Dollar. They were just ordinary men, who might be punchers or even townsmen. Nothing to distinguish them. They looked at him frankly and appraisingly, but with nothing more than healthy curiosity about a stranger—and a boy, at that.

Lish paused for a moment in front of the Dobe Dollar. The glass in the window was grimy, and the interior gloomy. But he did catch a glimpse of several men around a table at the north wall. Several others were bellied up to the bar. One man lounged on the porch, apparently dozing. But Lish knew that this man was staring at him through almost closed lids.

A shiver chased itself up and down his spine. He knew the man was a lookout for Gaffney and Lomax, that he was stationed on the porch to warn the pair of any danger approaching. The boy half turned and shot a glance back up at the livery stable. He breathed a little easier

when he realized that no one could be recognized at that distance.

There wasn't a chance that the two killers knew that one of their supposed victims was here in Railley—and that another, of whom they had never heard, stood just outside the Dobe Dollar. They would be certain that Laramie Wyman was dead out there in the sand. And Lish Carter did not exist as far as they knew.

The youngster moved on down the sidewalk. He could almost feel the impact of that man's gaze between his shoulder blades. But he did not look back until he had reached the corner beyond the store. A glance told him that the watcher had not moved. Apparently he didn't sense any danger in the slim fourteen-year-old boy.

Lish drew a quavering breath of relief. Now he turned left, as Dan Tobin had directed. The squat dobe house and the cluster of outbuildings and corrals a half mile away must be Gaffney's place. He hurried his steps, as he took the narrow path that wound across the sand and sagebrush.

Fifty yards from the house, he paused and hunkered on the sand to study it. He saw a heavy-bodied man in a splint-backed chair, leaning back against the wall in the shade of the overhanging roof. The man's hat was pulled far down over his eyes, and he did not move. Lish knew that he had not yet been seen.

This must be one of the two men Gaffney had to watch the place. The other was not in sight. The boy's eyes strayed beyond the house now. And he caught his breath, as he saw the end of a covered wagon beyond the saddle house to the left. Even that short glance brought instant recognition. But Tom and Nelly were not in sight.

NOW Lish straightened and strode silently toward the house. The fat man did not stir in his chair. And now, as he came closer, the boy knew he was half drunk, and sleeping soddenly. A twisted smile, half fear and half amusement, flicked the youngster's lips.

He circled the house silently and headed for the long, low horse shed back beside the corral some twenty yards beyond the house. Still no sign of anyone else around the place. He began to wonder now whether or not Dirk Braden really was being held here for ransom. Maybe he had been killed, and Gaffney or Lomax had written that letter to Laramie's boss.

No time to puzzle that out now, though. He slipped around the corner of the horse shed and lifted the latch on the door. For an instant he stood just inside, blinking in the hot gloom. Then his eyes, becoming accustomed to the darkness, made out the two heavy draft horses in the two back stalls.

"Tom an' Nelly!" he breathed. "They're here—an' they're all right!"

He hurried back along the dank passageway. Now he saw the harness, hanging on the pegs back of the stalls. With hands that trembled in hurried fear, he lifted the harness down and staggered toward the horses.

Before he led the team from the horse shed, he stole to the door and swept the cluster of buildings with a swift gaze. Still no one in sight. The stolid horses followed the boy and took their places beside the wagon tongue with practiced facility.

Lish Carter hitched up, climbed to the seat and gathered up the reins. He shot a downward glance at the dark stain on the seat where his grandfather habitually had sat, and moved over to the other side with a shiver.

For a full minute he sat there before he spoke to Tom and Nelly. Now that the biggest part of his preparations was over, he began to doubt his own wisdom, after all. Perhaps old Dan Tobin didn't know Gaffney and Lomax. Maybe the two killers would shoot him on sight.

Or maybe even the men here at Gaffney's place would gun him. Likely they were just as conscienceless as their employer. And certainly they would not have the least compunction at killing a youngster.

But he forced those thoughts from his mind. After all, he had promised Laramie Wyman that he would lure Gaffney and Lomax up to the livery stable. He couldn't back down on his new-found friend now. The least he could do was to try—was to follow his plan as far as he could.

With a tongue so dry he could hardly make a sound, he clucked to the horses and tightened the lines. The even, unhurried pace of the two sturdy animals strangely did something to calm his nerves.

Expertly he guided the team toward

the saddle house. He pulled them to a stop just in front of it, and climbed down. He moved toward the door, shooting a glance at the house. Then he stopped short, for a man stood in the door of the 'dobe. A wide man, squat and short-necked, with a stubble of black beard covering his face.

"Hi, you! What's goin' on down there?" The man's voice was a deep bellow.

Not waiting for an answer, the squat hombre stepped down and headed at a rolling walk toward the trembling boy. His hand was hovering over his gun butt, and his beady eyes were upon the youngster.

Lish Carter waited until the man faced him, waited until the beady eyes held his own—until the bellow came once more, with the same question.

"Buck Gaffney an' Rod Lomax have got a chance to get rid of this outfit," the boy said then. And he marveled that his trembling voice had steadied, that he could force a smile to his lips.

"Sent you after it? Who are you, anyhow?"

"Stranger in Railley," Lish Carter answered, steadily now. "But it don't take long to do business with Gaffney." Then a swift decision swept him—a decision that he would not have made upon mature thought. "Better bring out that redheaded man, too. Gaffney an' Lomax would like him along."

As the squat man eyed him still more closely, Lish almost held his breath. The hombre took still another step toward him, and his little eyes seemed to be looking right through the boy. Lish Carter felt his legs getting weak beneath him, just waiting for the man's answer.

"Young Braden, huh?" A grin that made the man's face more repulsive than ever twitched his stubbled upper lip. "Has that there feller with the money showed up?"

"Man from up Wyomin' way is in Railley," Lish Carter answered steadily. "An' he's right anxious to see if Gaffney really has Braden."

The squat man grinned again. And now Lish Carter turned to climb back onto the wagon seat. The man moved toward the door of the saddle house.

"I'll get him out, younker. Reckon he won't know how to act out in the sun."

Lish Carter waited, and it was the hardest work he had ever done. Every impulse urged him to climb down from the wagon seat and run for it as fast as his legs would go—run, no matter where, just so it was away from here. But he held himself fast.

In a moment the squat man appeared again, pushing another whose hands were bound with a tie-rope behind his back. Lish Carter's eyes swept this new comer. He saw the disheveled red hair, the haggard face with its fine stubble of red beard, the rumpled and dirty clothing. But he noticed that Dirk Braden walked erect, and that his eyes did not waver as they met his.

"Get up there, feller! We're goin' to meet up with a friend of yours," the burly hombre growled.

Dirk Braden shot a questioning glance at the boy on the seat of the wagon. Lish Carter's left eyelid dropped ever so slightly, and his head nodded. The squat man did not catch the wink, did not see the nod—but Dirk Braden did.

"You'll have to loose this here rope or give me a boost," he said softly. "Reckon you're afraid to slip the knot, though."

The squat man laughed loudly, coarsely. "Never seen the day I was scared of a skinny redhead from up north. If it was me, I wouldn't bother with no rope. But Gaffney is right anxious you don't get away. We'll leave the rope onto you."

He boosted Dirk Braden onto the boot of the wagon with an easy show of strength. Then he climbed up beside him. Braden sat in the middle, with Lish Carter and the squat man on either side. The burly ruffian slipped his six-gun from its holster and laid it in his lap now.

"We're ready to go, younker. Don't want to keep Buck Gaffney waitin'. Prod them broomtails."

Lish Carter straightened the lines and clucked to Tom and Nelly. But the old fear had come back to him again. Too many things that could happen. In the first place, he had not counted on the big man coming along. Nor had he been sure that Dirk Braden would be in the wagon. Both complicated matters.

But sitting stiffly erect, eyes straight ahead, he guided the team along the narrow, twisting trail. He felt Dirk Braden's gaze flicking toward him, could read the question in the blue eyes. But he did not speak.

## CHAPTER IV

WHEN they passed the 'dobe house, the squat man called to his companion, slouched in the shade. The other lifted a heavy hand at last, and waved it aimlessly. He didn't bother to straighten his thick body or shove the hat back from his eyes.

Lish Carter breathed a little easier when the house was behind. But he could not keep his mind from those two hundred yards of street they must travel. Worry and fear rode him heavy.

Then it was too late to stop—too late to turn back. For the wagon left the dim trail, and came out at the turn by the Rancher's Supply Store. The street was straight ahead of him, clear to the livery stable at the far end.

Lish Carter shot a glance at Dirk Braden, sitting straight in the seat, hands bound tightly behind him. Then he looked at the squat man at the other end of the seat. Braden still looked puzzled, but there was no hint of fear in his expression. The other man, slightly drunk, held a swaggering posture that was almost comical.

"When we get there, you climb down an' tell Gaffney." Lish Carter spoke softly, without turning his head. He felt Dirk Braden stiffen beside him. But the burly ruffian did not answer.

After a second, Lish half turned to look at the man. The hombre apparently had not heard the low words. Lish Carter blinked. He tried again, just as softly. Still no answer. The man was so busy trying to look important that he paid no attention to anything else.

Now the youngster lowered his voice to little more than a whisper. "If you can hear me, Braden, nudge me with your elbow." The nudge came.

"Now listen. When we get in front of the Dobe Dollar, I'll act like I'm goin' to stop. Then when this big ox starts to climb down, I'll snap the lines. An' you give him a push at the same time. Understand?"

A sidelong glance caught Braden's nod. Caught, too, the startled, excited look that swept across the redhead's face. A half-grin crinkled Lish Carter's lips. But he felt no amusement. Instead, cold, desperate fear gripped him. Fear that seemed to give added quickness to his mind and muscles.

He clucked to the team, and they moved ahead at a plodding walk up the middle of the street. Now the boy's left hand stole to his pocket and pulled out the long-bladed jackknife. As he glanced at the burly ruffian, saw that the man was still intent upon the street ahead, he opened the long blade.

Then he switched the reins to his left hand and slipped his right behind Dirk Braden. The redheaded puncher realized what he intended, and leaned forward ever so slightly. The sharp blade severed the rope that bound Braden, but the man still kept his hands behind him.

Now the Dobe Dollar was but a few yards ahead. Lish Carter tensed. He felt Braden stiffen beside him. The boy spoke, fighting to keep the tremble of excitement from his voice.

"I'm pullin' up, feller. Get ready to climb down." He repeated the statement in a louder tone before the big ruffian caught it. The man turned and grinned at him wickedly.

"Yeah. You pull up. I'll go tell Gaffney you're here."

Lish slowed down the team, stopped them for a bare instant. The squat man turned in the seat and thrust a booted foot down to feel for the hub. At the same instant the boy lashed the team with the line ends.

Dirk Braden's hands came from behind him. He shoved with all his strength with his left hand. His right shot out in a clenched fist, taking the big man behind the ear. The hombre grunted, pitched forward onto his face in the street. The team lunged forward in a gallop, and the covered wagon rumbled and creaked behind.

DIRK BRADEN spoke for the first time now, his voice tight with excitement. "Good work, son! But now where to? We ain't heeled, an' we'll have them skunks—"

"Laramie Wyman's waitin' for us—an' Gaffney—up at the livery stable! That's where we're headin'!"

Now a backward glance. The squat man was only now staggering to his feet in the middle of the road. His voice, just a thick bellow, was calling Gaffney. Men were pushing from the front door of the Dobe Dollar. As Lish Carter turned and gave full attention to driving, he saw a tall, wide-shouldered man with a shock of rumpled black hair driving with prod-

ding elbows out of the crowd toward the stricken guard.

Even in that short glance he recognized one of the men who had gunned his grandfather—recognized him by his build and not his face. He knew it was either Gaffney or Lomax—most likely the leader, himself.

He leaned forward and flicked Tom and Nelly with the line ends again. They redoubled their speed. And then the huge old livery stable was only a few yards ahead. The boy saw that old Dan Tobin had thrown the wide doors open, and he headed straight for the opening.

As the wagon rumbled into the barn, he heard the doors swing shut with a bang behind. He stopped the team and turned toward Dirk Braden. But already the redheaded puncher was off the seat and streaking back toward the door.

As Lish Carter swung down, he saw Braden and Laramie Wyman meet—saw the quick handclasp, the smile that flicked Laramie's lips. Then both men whirled and made for the little office. Lish followed at a run.

Laramie was standing just to one side of the half-opened door, where he could see without being seen. Old Dan Tobin's gunbelt with filled holster was buckled around Laramie's waist. The old man was back in one corner, an excited grin on his face and a glitter in his bright little eyes. Dirk Braden stood a step back and to one side of Laramie.

None of them spoke as the boy charged in. They just glanced at him and back to the street outside. Lish Carter raced to the high little window of the office and looked out.

A crowd was gathered down in front of the Dobe Dollar Saloon. And halfway up to the livery stable, two men strode side by side. One was Buck Gaffney and the other was Rod Lomax. Lish Carter recognized them by their huge stature, even if he had never seen them face to face.

Laramie Wyman shot a questioning look toward the boy. Lish nodded swiftly. "That's them!"

The cold smile widened on Laramie Wyman's face. For the two killers were striding swiftly and with little care for their safety. The men in the little office knew that they expected nothing except a slim boy and an unarmed puncher.

"Better get 'em on the run, Laramie!" Dan Tobin said in a thin, high voice. "They're pizen with their sixguns!"

Laramie Wyman shook his head, the grin still on his face. Gaffney and Lomax were only fifty yards down the street now, and coming fast. Lish Carter could feel his nerves and muscles tensing until they became almost painful. But Laramie Wyman looked cool and deliberate.

The pound of hurried feet came clear now. Gaffney's voice, raspy and penetrating, came to them plainly. They even caught the words.

"Ain't got no idea who that younker is, Rod! Butch Gilpin says he's a plumb stranger in Railley. Must have knowed Braden, though. Called him by name. I'll pistol-whip that damn booze-hoister after we finish with the kid an' the redhead. Lettin' a younker like that outsmart him."

"But mebbe the kid did have a gun, Buck!" Lomax' voice was deeper, coarser.

"Naw—he wasn't heeled. Gilpin wasn't too drunk to know that. Just some crazy idea that a kid gets sometimes. He'll shore wish he was never borned. I'll give ol' Tobin what's comin', too. He's been a troublemaker ever since we hit Railley."

THE men were just in front of the barn. They paused for a second—and in that instant Laramie Wyman pushed the door of the little office wide. He stepped out into the bright sunlight, and faced the two startled killers.

"Maybe it's me instead of the kid you're lookin' for, Gaffney! Maybe you'd like to drag down on me whilst I'm facin' you, huh? You tried shootin' from behind, an' it didn't take!"

"It's that—hombre from—up north!" The words that came from Rod Lomax' throat were thick, strangled. His eyes went wide with swift fear. He crouched, leaped wide of Buck Gaffney.

Gaffney himself, with his round, stubbled face beneath the shock of unruly black hair, blinked swiftly, His mouth dropped open in amazement, in desperate fear. But even then his reflex actions, the result of long practice, came to his rescue—or to bring him his doom.

For he crouched low, turning his side to Laramie Wyman. His right hand darted to his holster and the long-barreled six-gun leaped into his fist. As the muzzle swept toward the Wyoming puncher, Laramie moved.

The draw was startling swift, so fo-

that Lish Carter's wide eyes could hardly follow the movement. The two guns roared almost in unison, but Laramie's was just the tiniest fraction of a second faster.

Gaffney's bullet plowed into the ground right at Laramie Wyman's toe. But Laramie's found its mark, squarely through the killer's heart. The man staggered backward as his knees buckled beneath him. His eyes rolled until only the whites showed. His mouth opened, but only a gurgle came as he crumpled in a heap.

Laramie Wyman barely glanced at the man as he whirled toward Lomax, for he knew that his shot had been true. Lomax had started to draw. But when he saw the lightning speed of the Wyoming puncher, his six-gun dropped back into its holster.

He whirled and started at a zigzagging run back down the street. Laramie Wyman stood with feet widespread, shoulders slightly hunched. He swung his gun up deliberately, aimed it carefully.

Its sullen bellow came once more. Rod Lomax stumbled two steps forward and pitched onto his face. A shrill, fear-filled scream left his lips as he dropped. Laramie Wyman stood like a carved statue for three seconds.

Behind him, Dirk Braden found his voice. "You shouldn't ought to've gunned him in the back, Laramie! That ain't like—"

But now Laramie Wyman was racing toward Lomax. He stood above him, as the man rolled over with a groan. The puncher stooped and snatched the gun from the prone man's holster.

"Get up, you yaller coyote!" Laramie growled. "Get up, afore I stove in your ribs with my toe!"

Still hardly believing that he was not dead, eyes wide and brimming with terror, Rod Lomax staggered to his feet. Dirk Braden, Lish Carter and old Dan Tobin were speeding to the Wyoming puncher's side. And now the boy saw what had downed the killer. A grin spread across his white face. For Laramie Wyman's last bullet had struck Rod Lomax' right boot heel, tearing it off and knocking the man from his feet at the same time.

Laramie had his six-gun muzzle in the trembling man's ribs now. "Your boss is dead, but we're collectin' from you, feller. We want the bag of coin you took off me —the five thousand dollars you stole from this here younker's grandpop, after you killed him—an' we want my hoss and Dirk Braden's."

"It—it was—Buck Gaffney's idea!" Rod Lomax said, his voice thin and high with terror. "I—I didn't do none of the killin'! I didn't want to hold this here redheaded—"

Laramie Wyman's smile was cold and his voice steely. "You ain't got Gaffney to back you up now. An' Railley ain't behind you no more. Never was for you—just scared of you."

"That's right, Laramie!" Dan Tobin's cackle broke in. "Railley shore owes you plenty for riddin' it of its varmints!"

"I'll get you the money!" Red Lomax promised. "I'll get you more than you ask for, if you'll let me get my horse an' hit the trail."

"Your only trail from here is to the gallows!" Laramie Wyman said brusquely. "Now get to movin'. Dirk an' me an' my pard, Lish Carter, is aimin' to hit the trail right sudden back to Wyomin'."

Lish Carter blinked. "You—you mean, Laramie, that you're goin' to take me with you? That I'll be goin' along—"

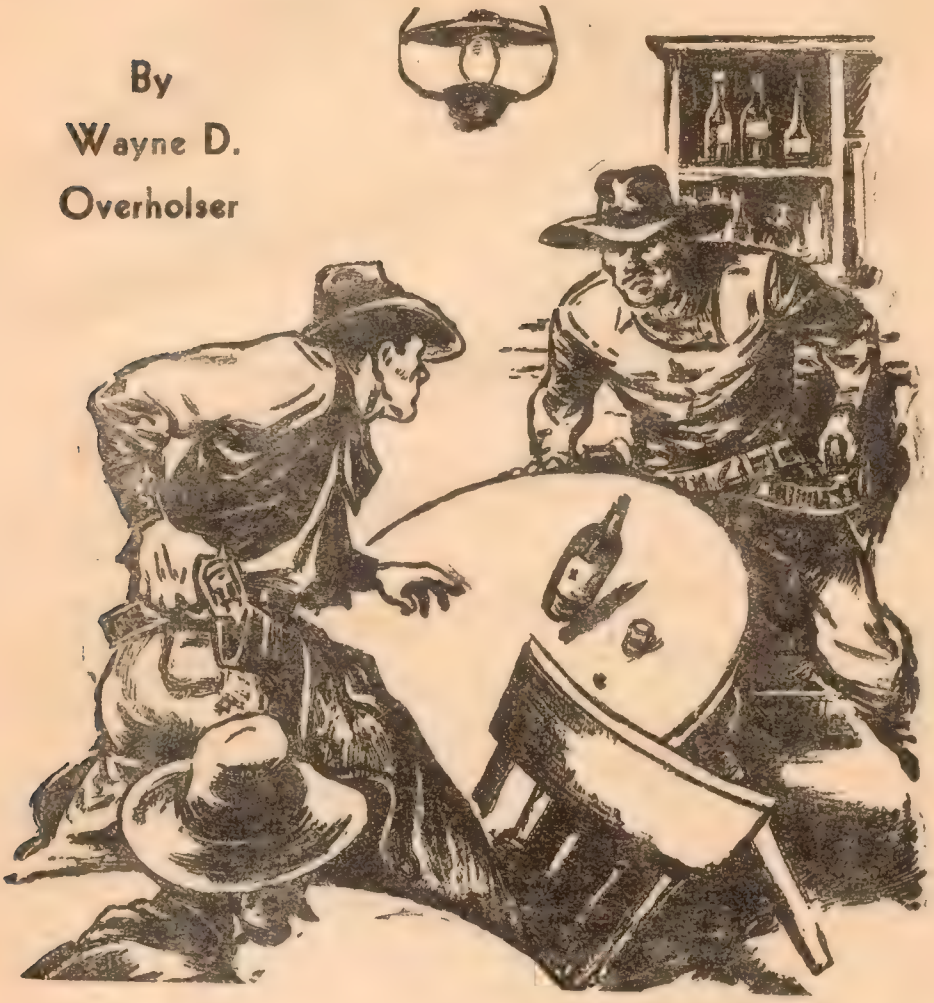
Laramie Wyman smiled again, this time a softer smile that held a hint of real affection. "Couldn't get along without you, Lish. Reckon ol' man Braden an' Dirk, here, would be tickled to get a new cowhand, too. Anyhow, I'm honin' to see how it would be to ride in a covered wagon clean to Wyomin'. Ain't never rode in one of them things."

"Gosh!" Lish Carter said. "You mean I'll learn to be a real cowboy? I still can't hardly believe it! It's what I'd rather do than anything else in the world!"

Then, almost as an afterthought, for a boy's memory and grief are mercifully short, he said: "Grandpop would be glad, too. He was right set on my growin' up in the West."

# Badman Masquerader

By
Wayne D.
Overholser



★ ★ ★

*Wearing a desperado's duds and toting that hombre's sixes, Hap Gregg was all set to side his brother in a gun deal. But it took more than an outlaw's clothes and Colts to outsmart back-shooting buzzards.*

★ ★ ★

IN ALL the miles between the Cascades and the Snake River, and there are a lot of them, you couldn't have found two brothers more unlike than the Gregg boys. Al, the older by five years, had listened when his mother had taught the kids that honesty, dependability, and industry are the human attributes that it takes to get along. But her words had bounced off young Hap's eardrums like rain on a new shingle.

"You sure gravel me," Al growled as they rode down the juniper-clad slope into Zenith. "You ain't yellow, but you

ain't no hero like you make out. I used to spend half of my time keeping you out of trouble, and reckon I ain't done yet. Hod dang it, why couldn't you ride in here and tell folks you was my brother, instead of pretending you're Swift Merseth? 'Bout the time some rider slopes in who knows Merseth got beefed you'll get a horselaugh folks can hear plumb to the Columbia."

"Shucks, Al, I didn't make no brag." Hap's easy grin widened. "I just dropped into the Sugar Pine, and that long-geared galoot you call Trigger Hassler sees my guns, takes a look at my saddle and this roan, and yells for everybody to step up and drink with the great Merseth. I couldn't ruin the play, could I?"

"You'd have been smart if you had." Al scowled. "Hassler is the kind of a hairpin who notches his gun. He'll call you out one of these days."

"And if I smoke him down," Hap said placidly, "it oughta be quite a help to you, seeing as Hassler's Sid Roby's top gunhand, and Roby's making you a pile of trouble."

Al didn't say anything for a time. When he'd homesteaded on West Prong, he'd taken chips in a game in which industry, honesty, and dependability were mighty little help. Sid Roby was the power on West Prong, and he forgave no man who homesteaded on his range and refused to sell. That left Al two choices. He could sell, or wait for a slug in the back. Being a stubborn man who was opposed to running, and being in love with Nan Wilton, Al had elected to wait for the slug in the back.

"All right," Al said heavily as they reined up in front of the Sugar Pine and dismounted. "I reckon you mean well, Hap, but you're no match for Trigger Hassler. You'll be the one who gets smoked down, and that won't be no help to me." He looped the reins over the hitch-pole, and turned to face Hap. "When the smoke starts flying, Hap, I'm done. All I'm trying to do is to get along."

"Which you can't do with a hombre like Sid Roby." Hap's fading grin left his long face deadly serious. "I know how jiggers like him work. From your letter I knew you was in trouble. That's why I rode up here. Long as Hassler and Roby think I'm Merseth, they'll be a mite slow starting things. Now don't be a darned fool, and tell anybody who I am."

"You're the fool," Al snapped. "It don't do no good to play somebody you ain't, but that's like you. Always being flashy and trying to look big."

"Go ahead," Hap said, the grin returning to his lips. "Hooraw me all you want to. Words don't bother me. I'm gonna get a drink, and then I'm calling on Nan. We're taking her to dinner."

AL HAD started toward Meeker's Mercantile. Now he wheeled to face Hap, quick anger darkening his square face. "There's one thing I won't stand for. That's you playing fast and loose with Nan. It'd be your style to make her fall in love with you, and then walk off and leave her. You ain't doing that to Nan."

Hap gestured airily. "Why, Al, you ain't got me straight at all. Mebbe I'll marry her."

Hap moved around the pole, leaving Al staring darkly after him. Then, when the batwings slapped shut behind Hap, Al turned on his heel, and strode across the dust strip to the Mercantile.

Sid Roby was in the Sugar Pine with a couple of Zenith townsmen, and three punchers from the Flying V south of town. His yellow eyes fastened on the silver-mounted guns that rode on Hap's lean thighs. Slowly they moved upward to the chipmunk-skin vest, the green silk shirt, the bony, bronzed face, the expensive cream Stetson. For a time Roby seemed to be considering something of profound importance. Then, when Hap reached the bar, Roby left his place beside the Flying V men, and moved to where Hap stood.

"I can't quite figger this," Roby said bluntly. "I never saw Swift Merseth, but from what I've heard, his guns went to the highest bidder. He wouldn't side a hombre like Al Gregg who ain't got nothing to his name but the shirt on his back, and a quarter section he ain't gonna have long. How come you're still here, feller?"

"You don't call Merseth 'feller'," Hap said, his usual smile fading from his dark face.

Roby waved a pudgy hand tolerantly. Swift Merseth's ways were well known in Zenith, and one of them was his in-

sistence that he be called Merseth and nothing else.

"All right," Roby said doggedly. "I asked you a question. How come you're still here?"

"It's the climate," Hap said, and grinned.

"This climate is plumb bad for gents that buck me," Roby pointed out.

"I ain't bucking nobody." Hap turned his back to Roby. "Whisky," he called to the apron.

The apron didn't move. He was watching Sid Roby. Then Roby's silky-toned words came to Hap. "Anybody that sides Al Gregg is bucking me. Now mebbe you're playing a cagey game, and waiting for a bid from me. If you are, I'll make you a deal."

Hap turned back to Roby then, all laughter gone suddenly from his eyes. He said, "I reckon you've got Merseth pegged a mite wrong. Al Gregg is an old friend of mine. I aim to stay with him awhile. My trail's crossed with your kind before, Roby. You got a little dinero, and dinero gives a man power. Them are the two things you live for. Me, I just want to be let alone and have my friends let alone. Savvy?"

A knowing smile was on Sid Roby's lips. "I savvy all right, Merseth. You're still cagey. Gents like you work up the bid as high as they can before they take a job. I'd always heard you was smart, Merseth. All right. I'll give you a good offer. Five hundred dollars if you work Al Gregg into a fight, and beat him to the draw. If you don't—" Roby shrugged. "I don't pay nothing to dead men."

Hard anger was in Hap's dark eyes now as he stepped away from the bar and stood so that he could see every man in the room. Then he said ominously:

"Five hundred dollars is made up of cents, and only one kind of animal gives off that many bad scents. I'll pull my guns for nothing, Roby. Mebbe it'll save trouble if we smoke it out now, seeing as I'm backing Al Gregg's play plumb through to the end. Have at it, Roby."

Silence then, a tight and breathless silence. Sid Roby licked his lips, his fat face suddenly drawn and gray. He made no move for the gun he carried, and no sound came from his lips. Back along the bar a man coughed, a dry, brittle sound that seemed strangely loud. Then Hap laughed harshly.

"All right, Roby," Hap said. "I pegged you for a yaller pup hiding behind Trigger Hassler's guns. I reckon I've showed these gents that I was plumb right. I'll do without that drink." He nodded at the apron. "With the kind of stink I've been smelling, it wouldn't taste good nohow."

HAP swung on his heel, and strode to the batwings. One of the townsmen called after him, "You'd best be riding, Merseth. We don't want no gun ruckus in Zenith. Trigger Hassler is in Meeker's Mercantile. When he hears what happened in here, he'll come after you with his guns a-smoking."

Hap paused, the easy grin curving his lips again. "Thanks, feller. Reckon I'll just step over to the Mercantile, and tell Mr. Hassler all about it." Then Hap went out of the saloon, the batwings slapping shut behind him.

This was dynamite, and nobody knew it better than Hap Gregg. He wasn't as fast with the silver-mounted guns as the great Swift Merseth had been. Perhaps he wasn't as fast as Trigger Hassler, but he understood men like Sid Roby, and he understood paid gunmen like Hassler. The big thing in his favor was Merseth's name. He'd been in a tiny Arizona town the day Swift Merseth had been killed. It was the day after he'd received Al's letter. That was the reason he'd bought Merseth's outfit and headed north. But the value of Merseth's name was something a man like Al couldn't understand.

The one thing that would beat Sid Roby and Trigger Hassler was to destroy their prestige. Hap had done that to Roby. It was exactly what he aimed to do to Hassler, and he thought it could be done without gunplay. That was why he went directly to the Mercantile from the Sugar Pine.

Jeff Meeker, the Mercantile's owner, was behind the counter waiting on Al. Trigger Hassler and two of Roby's cowhands were sitting beside the big potbellied stove, their chairs canted back against the wall, swapping talk with the town marshal, Bill Ash. Al straightened, and watched Hap narrowly as he came in. Meeker, too, kept his eyes on Hap. The talk at the stove came to a quick end when the marshal and the Rocking R men saw who it was.

"I'm about done," Al said quickly, but

Hap acted as if he hadn't heard. He moved toward the stove, watching Bill Ash, and gauging the lawman's reaction to what was to come.

Ash was a small man who had rodded more than one boom town with a ruthless hand, but age had slowed his draw, and taken some of his courage from him. He recognized Sid Roby as the power in Zenith, so he gave the Rocking R crew a free hand when they were in town. His gray eyes were troubled as he watched Hap come up.

He said uneasily, "I was just telling Trigger that there was nothing in Zenith for a man like you, Merseth. Reckon you'll be riding along one of these days."

"Yeah," Hap said softly, "but not today. It's a funny thing, marshal. When you smell something long enough you get so you don't notice it. That's the way you are, but me, I'm different. When a skunk moves into a cabin, a man's got to do one of two things. Either he gits out, and lets the skunk have it, or he smokes him out. The way I figger it, that's the smart thing to do."

Trigger Hassler let down the front legs of his chair with a bang. He was a tall man, almost as tall as Hap, and he had a pair of hard green eyes that were glittering now with quick and savage hatred.

"Talk straight, Merseth," he said angrily. "What are you trying to say?"

Hap was close to Hassler, crowding him so that the gunman couldn't make a fast draw without getting out of his chair, and the chair was hard against the wall. Hassler saw too late, that this was trouble, and he was caught off balance.

"Sure," Hap breathed. "I'll talk straight. Your boss just offered me five hundred dollars to beef my friend, Al Gregg. Funny thing he couldn't trust you to do the job."

"He could trust me all right," Hassler bellowed. "I'll—"

"I reckon he couldn't," Hap breathed, "or he wouldn't offer me that kind of dinero. You're too yaller to tackle a man in a straight fight. You'll try for Al from a dark alley, or mebbe you'll 'bush him out on the range someday. I know your kind, Hassler, and I know how Sid Roby figgers. He sure made a mistake with me. I gave him a chance to pull his iron on me, but he wouldn't have any of it."

HASSLER mouthed a curse. He came up out of his chair, reaching for his gun, but he didn't get the Colt from leather. Hap hit him on the side of the face with his open palm, a savage slap that rocked the gunman's head. Then Hap's right fist came up in a cruel, vicious blow that caught Hassler on the point of the chin and knocked him off his feet. Hassler spilled back over the lap of one of the Rocking R men and fell onto the floor.

Hap raised his eyes from the motionless gunman to Bill Ash. "You see how it is, marshal. I've got something to stay for. I aim to see that my friend Al gets a square deal. I reckon he will now. Gents like Roby ride high and handsome till somebody clips their tail feathers. Gunslicks like Hassler ain't so tough either when the chips are down."

"Now look, Merseth," Ash blustered, "I'll have no trouble in my town. You mount up that roan and start riding."

"I'll start no trouble, marshal," Hap breathed. "Over in the Sugar Pine I showed the boys just how yaller Sid Roby is. Now you see that his gun-dog Hassler don't throw as big a shadow as mebbe you allowed. I'm willing to live and let live. You can tell Hassler that when he wakes up."

Hap heeled toward Al. "Let's go put the feed bag on, son."

They left the store together, a new light in Al Gregg's eyes as he followed his brother into the sunshine. Then he said tonelessly, "The fat's in the fire now, Hap. Roby and Hassler can't let this go."

The reckless grin was on Hap's lips again. "I reckon they will. I tell you I know how this kind of hombres work. All it takes is a name like Swift Merseth's and a little bluff. They'll tuck their tail between their legs and vamoose. You won't have no more trouble."

"I've tried to get along with 'em, Hap," Al answered somberly. "I never gave 'em no reason to put pressure on me. Now they've got plenty of reason. You haven't helped any. You've just messed everything up. You've always been that way. Always showing off, and when the chips are down, you'll be gone."

"I reckon I'll stick around," Hap said quickly. He clenched his right fist, and straightened out his fingers. "I'm hoping this is all there is to it. I banged up my fist on Hassler's chin. Reckon I wouldn't

be too good if it came to some powder-burning. Mebbe I should o' gone for my iron instead of taking a poke at Hassler."

"No," Al muttered. "I'm thanking you, Hap, but you've done enough. Ash was right. You'd better mount up and ride."

Hap chuckled. "Not me, son. We're taking Nan to dinner. Come on. Let's go get her."

"All right," Al agreed dourly, "but if you're set on staying, don't forget what I said about Nan."

Hap grinned mirthlessly. That had always been Al's way. Calling him a showoff and letting trouble sneak up. Well, Al Gregg would have to go on being that way. Slow and steady and trying to duck trouble. He'd make Nan a hell of a husband.

Before this was over, maybe Al would find out that his brother Hap wasn't all showoff. He worked the fingers of his right hand, thinking he'd been a fool to hit Hassler, and suddenly realizing that this wasn't the way Swift Merseth would have gone about a job. He wondered if Hassler would think of that. If he did, he'd come gunning. If he didn't there'd be more trouble. Trigger Hassler wasn't a man to swap powdersmoke with Swift Merseth.

NAN WILTON lived with her mother in a white cottage at the west end of Main Street. She answered Hap's knock, smiled at him and then at Al. For the life of him, Hap couldn't decide which was the bigger smile. She was pretty, this Nan Wilton, pretty and fine and decent, the kind of girl who deserved the best in life, and Al Gregg wasn't the kind of a man who'd give it to her.

"Howdy, Nan," Al said a little huskily.

"Hello, Al," Nan said, "and Swift. What brings you boys in all the way from the West Prong?"

"You," Hap said cheerily, his Stetson coming off in a sweeping gesture. "Nan, you sure are a sight for a couple o' cowpokes who ain't had nothing to look at but themselves and a bunch o' ornery cow critters. You're just naturally getting purtier every day."

"Swift Merseth," Nan said severely, "you've been in the Sugar Pine before you came here, or you wouldn't be talking that way."

"I was there," Hap admitted, "but so help me, I didn't have nothing to drink. It's just that looking at you makes my head swim worse'n any forty-rod I ever drank."

"I never heard anybody talk like you do," Nan said, and colored in a way that told Hap she liked it.

"Never mind his talking," Al said sourly. "He allus was long on the bag."

"I don't mind, Al," Nan said. "I don't mind at all."

"We come to take you to dinner," Hap grinned amiably. "I've been eating Al's cooking so long I can't look a bean in the face. Three times a day I look at a plate of beans. That's the only thing he can cook. Dang it, Nan—"

"Aw, dry up," Al said testily.

Hap chuckled. "See how it is, Nan? He's even getting indigestion himself. Beanitis, we used to call it in Arizona. Now we're gonna mosey down to the hotel and get us the biggest steak you ever saw. I'm aiming to eat a whole apple pie. Go get your blue bonnet on, the one that matches your eyes, and let's get going. I sure am hankering to put my teeth into that steak."

Any other time Hap would have noticed, as they walked back to the hotel, that the street was ominously deserted. Too, he would have noticed men's faces peering at them from behind the windows of the stores and offices that lined Main Street. But today Hap was too busy talking to Nan to notice anything.

The hotel dining room was deserted when Hap led the way to a table. That, too, was strange for a Saturday noon. When Nan said something about it, Hap shrugged.

"Reckon they knew we was coming, Nan, and they figgered it was only right and just to give us the dining room." He held Nan's chair for her, and then moved around the table and sat down. "Hey, where in blazes did Al go? He was right behind us when we came in."

"A boy came in with a note," Nan said, "and Al went back into the street after he read it."

For a moment Hap sobered. Then the grin came to his lips again. "It's all right with me if Al don't want to eat with us." He leaned back in his chair, dark eyes on Nan. "You know, Nan, I've always been kind o' fiddle-footed. Can't ever seem to settle down. Never seen nothing to settle down for until I hit this burg and saw you. Things look a heap different

now:" He leaned forward, long face suddenly serious. "You know, Nan, the gent that marries you is gonna have something worth settling down for. Now I ain't got—"

"Please, Swift," Nan said, "I'd rather not talk about it."

THE girl was looking away from him. For a moment Hap paused, wondering why she had said that. He thought that perhaps it was Al she loved, but Al was the kind who wouldn't ask her to marry him until he could give her the luxuries a wife should have. That, in Al Gregg's case, would be years. A girl like Nan Wilton couldn't be expected to wait for years.

"There'll never be a better time to talk about it," Hap said doggedly. "Now look, Nan. I got this to say, and I reckon I've got to say it. I've been drifting around for years, and I never knew what I was looking for. Now I know. I—"

Outside a gunshot lashed into the sultry silence. Hap froze. The deserted street, the empty dining room, the note that had come for Al. These things had meant nothing a moment before. Now they were filled with ominous and terrible meaning.

Hap kicked back his chair and leaped to a window. Men were boiling into the street. In the dust Al Gregg lay motionless. Hap ran to the door, and toward the knot of men gathering around Al's still form. He heard Jeff Meeker say, "It was Trigger Hassler. Al didn't have a chance. Nobody's got any chance against a gunslick like that."

Doc Ladoo was leaning over Al. "He ain't dead. Just got a slug along his skull. He'll be coming around. Help me get him over to the office."

Hap was on his knees in the dust beside Al, staring at the bloody gash across his brother's head. He was thinking of what Al had said about keeping him out of trouble when they'd been kids, of his telling Al he'd hurt his hand when he'd hit Hassler, and he was thinking he'd been the biggest fool in Oregon when he'd figured he'd bluffed Sid Roby and Hassler into letting Al alone. Now he saw it straight. The only thing that would ever help Al Gregg would be a dose of hot lead for Roby and his gunslick.

Bill Ash began to curse. He laid a hand on Hap's shoulder. "I reckon Trigger was right when he came to in the store. He said you wasn't Merseth. He figgered you was some kin to Al, and you must be, or Al wouldn't have faced Hassler just to keep your hide from getting ventilated."

Hap jerked away from the marshal's grip and rose. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

Ash held up a dirty piece of paper. "That was in Al's shirt pocket. Read it, and then get to hell out of here. Looks to me like you're nothing but a yaller showoff letting Al take lead while you go around sporting a pair of irons that once belonged to a real man."

Hap grabbed the paper from the marshal's fingers. On it were scrawled the words:

> Come into the street smoking your iron. You ain't Merseth. Nobody takes a poke at me and lives long. I say you're a yaller, dressed-up dude.
>
> HASSLER

Hap saw it now. He'd been a bigger fool even than he'd thought. The note had come for him. Al had taken it, taken it because he thought Hap couldn't match Hassler's gun speed, and he thought he had a chance.

"We don't have room in this town for a coward," Bill Ash said ominously. "Mount that roan of your'n and get the dust to rolling."

"Talk about cowards," Hap said grimly, "seems kind o' funny coming outa you after the way you've let Sid Roby run this town."

"Sid ain't broke no laws," Ash snapped. "Soon as Al comes around, I reckon he'll sell out, and there won't be no more trouble. Now git."

"Sure," Hap murmured.

He turned back to Al and drew in his breath sharply. Nan was in the dust, cradling Al's head in her arms and sobbing, "Take him to my house, Doc."

Nan Wilton must have known that the man she called Swift Merseth would not let this go, but she had no thought of him. That Hap saw as plainly as he saw the feeling she had for Al Gregg. Quickly, then, Hap stepped around the crowd, strode to the hitchrack in front of the Sugar Pine, and mounted.

Inside the saloon Trigger Hassler would be waiting for him with Sid Roby and the two Rocking R punchers. There would be no fair fight for him if he went into the saloon through the batwings, so

he rode out of town toward West Prong. He circled north and east again until he reached a dry wash that cut south toward town.

Half an hour after Hap had left Zenith he stood in the litter-filled alley back of the Sugar Pine. There was no back door to the saloon, but there was a window that opened into a storeroom. Hap slid it open, and crawled through it. A door led into the saloon. Hap opened it a fraction of an inch and had a look. Roby and Hassler were at the bar. Farther along it were the Flying V punchers who had been in the saloon that morning. The two Rocking R men were with them, and at the far end were Bill Ash, Jeff Meeker and a few other townsmen.

Hap eased his guns in leather, opened and closed his fists, and found that the stiffness had left his right hand. Then he opened the door and stepped into the saloon.

"All right, Hassler," Hap called, "I'm taking you and your boss. Everybody else stand pat, and they don't get hurt."

Bill Ash spun toward the two Rocking R hands who stood with the Flying V riders, plucking gun as he moved.

"That means you two," he barked. "Do your job, feller," he called to Hap.

THE old, reckless grin was on Hap Gregg's face as he stood spread-legged, eyeing Trigger Hassler and Sid Roby. He said softly, "Mebbe you aimed to get Al all the time, Hassler, but you're sure a damned poor shot. You got one thing right. I ain't Swift Merseth. I'm Al Gregg's brother. This time it ain't my fist you're getting. It's a hot chunk of lead, and it's got your name on it."

Still neither Hassler nor Roby moved. This wasn't to their liking, but both saw there was no way out of it. Roby's pudgy face was a sickly gray just as it had been that morning. Hassler's green eyes were narrowed, locked with Hap's as he measured the man before him. Then, without warning, his right hand knifed downward for gun butt.

Both Hap Gregg's guns slid from leather. They were no higher than his hips when the hammers dropped. Two bullets caught Trigger Hassler just as he squeezed trigger, one in the stomach, the other higher. Again Hap's guns roared as Hassler went down. Sid Roby had fired. His slug breathed hotly by Hap's face,

and that was the only shot he fired, for the Rocking R owner was dead. With the last bit of life in him bitter and hate-driven, he lurched forward, tried to prong back the hammer. Failing, he pitched forward on his face.

Silence then, while gun echoes died, and smoke ballooned upward in the still air. Finally Bill Ash said:

"All right, your Rocking R bunch has ridden high and handsome all it's going to. Git." They obeyed without a word. Presently the sound of their horses' hoofbeats came to those in the saloon.

Then Hap, his guns holstered, came toward Bill Ash, and he said, "I don't catch on, marshal. A spell ago you was calling me yaller and telling me to get out of town."

Ash laughed shortly. "I had you pegged right, son. I knowed you wouldn't let this go, so I gave you an excuse to get out of town. I knew danged well you'd be back. That's why I came in here and stayed to see you got a fair fight." He held out his hand and Hap gripped it.

The marshal went on, "You ain't much like your brother, and you ain't no paid gunslick like Swift Merseth. I reckon you've done a heap of drifting and you're ready to settle down. I'm too old to keep on packing a star. I've let them hellers—" he jerked a thumb at the dead men—"do some things I wouldn't have if I'd been as fast on the draw as I used to be. There's a railroad coming to Zenith, and it'll be a hot town. It needs a gent with quick hands and guts like you for marshal. How about it?"

"Why," Hap said softly, and thought of Nan Wilton, "I reckon mebbe I ain't quite ready yet. Thanks, marshal."

Hap turned then and started toward the storeroom.

"Hey, hold on." It was Doc Ladoo who always showed up with his black bag in his hand when he heard shooting.

Hap swung back. "You ain't got a job here, Doc."

"I ain't looking for a job," the medico said testily. "I just left Al. He wants to see you."

"I'll stop," Hap said, and went on into the storeroom, climbed back through the window and mounted. He didn't want to see Al. He didn't want to see Nan. The job he'd come to do was done, and he'd almost failed. Al Gregg had come close to death, and for no more reason than the fact that Hap made a mistake judging Trigger Hassler.

But Hap did stop at Nan's cottage. Nan was standing in the doorway when he came up the walk. She smiled at him, a little tremulously, and said:

"Al wants to see you. He was afraid you'd ride on."

Hap didn't speak. He didn't feel like speaking. He nodded, and Nan took his hand and led him into a bedroom. Al was in bed, a bandage around his head.

He said quietly, "We heard some shooting. What happened?"

Hap told him. Then he paused, and swallowed. "Dangit, Al, why didn't you give me that note Hassler sent?"

Al grinned. "I've known more'n you figgered I did. I've cussed myself a dozen times for ever writing you about the trouble I was having. It was my scrap, son, and I'd never have forgiven myself if Hassler had killed you. I know you took Merseth's name to bluff Hassler, and I knew it wouldn't work. I been hooraw-ing you about it so's you'd get mad and pull out, but that didn't work either."

Hap looked at Nan and she looked at him, and then Al laughed aloud.

"It's a funny thing," he said. "I've asked her to marry me, Hap, ten times or more. But all the time she was waiting for you, I reckon. You can't make a woman love you. If she don't, she don't. That's all there is to it. Seeing as I can't have her for a wife, the next best thing would be to get her for sister-in-law."

Hap wheeled toward the bed. "That ain't the way you've been—"

"Yeah, sure," Al said amiably. "It ain't the way I've been talking, but don't forget I've been doing my damndest to get you out of town. For a gent that's allus been able to talk big and easy, you sure are slow."

Hap was looking at Nan again. He had thought of some pretty words to say, but now he couldn't think of them.

He asked bluntly, "Nan, will you marry me?"

"Why, yea, I will," Nan said softly.

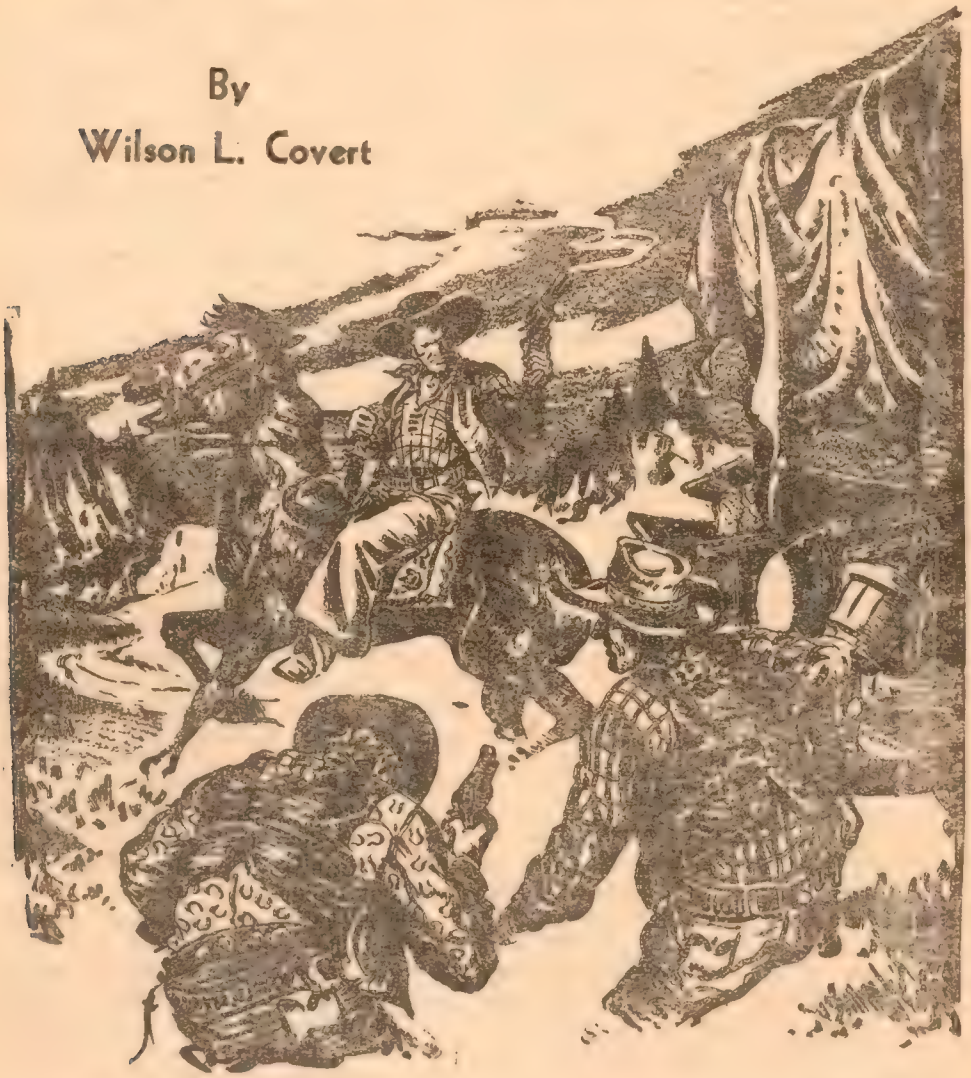
Al sighed. "That's a right purty sight, Hap. Just forget all about me being here. Go on, kiss her."

But Hap had started for the door. He called over his shoulder, "I've got to see a man about a job. I'm settling down—and Nan, don't go away, I'll be right back."

# Hot-Lead Reunion

By

Wilson L. Covert



*Palavering about their Colt careers of the past, these two old rannies once again hankered for the sight of a .45 fracas. But they hadn't figured on a polecat's play to have them look at each other through powdersmoke.*

"THOSE were the days," sighed old Zack Ledlie, of the Lazy L. He shifted in his chair and pointed to a pair of dusty shotgun chaps on the wall. "Remember, Mace, when I salted the rustler wearin' them at five hundred yards, with my Winchester?"

Mace Baxter, gray-haired boss of the Circle B, nodded, took a long swallow from the glass in his hand. "Sure do. My

livin' room's cluttered with things like that. We were young then, had to fight varmints of all kinds. Nothin' ever happens now."

"You wish it would, eh?" Zack grinned, facing his friend and neighbor of thirty years on the Windy River range. "So do I sometimes. We earned what we own today, the best spreads for two hundred miles around. Did I tell you that land speculator in Lone Cedar, Hank Sneed, asked what I'd sell out for?"

Mace frowned. "He asked me, too. I said no, with a big period. What'd you tell him?"

"The same," replied Zack, his craggy face sober. "Though there's times I wonder why I hold on. Mary's been dead twenty-three years, and our boy Jeff has been gone two, now. That blasted diamondback in his blanket!" Zack pressed a hand over his eyes.

A light step sounded beyond the living-room door. Both cattlemen looked up as a brown-haired girl in range togs entered, her wide-brimmed hat slung on one arm by the chinstrap.

"You rannies still fighting old range battles over again?" smiled Bernita Baxter. "I've been to see everybody on the place, Uncle Zack, but I don't suppose Dad's ready to go home."

"Been wishin'," said Zack Ledlie, "that we could relive the old times, smell powder burnin'. I guess it's in our blood."

A six-shooter banged distantly. While the two oldsters and the girl looked at one another, the patter of hoofs on hard earth drifted through the open windows. Bernita hurried to the nearest one, her father and Zack rising quickly to join her. They beheld a horseman tearing down the slope fronting the Lazy L ranch house. A Colt tilted up in his right hand as he glanced behind, but no pursuer was visible at the moment.

"I can't make out who he is," said Mace, straining gaze over Bernita's shoulder.

"New to me," replied the girl. "Looks young. He's turning off to the corral."

"Be a good idea to see what he's up to!" exclaimed Zack, plunging for the door. "I have some fine horses in that corral."

Emerging from the house, the cowmen and the girl turned toward the high-fenced round pen, forty yards east of the dwelling. The hard-riding young man was out of his saddle, reaching for the catch-rope on the gatepost. A stranger on the Lazy L, his intention was obvious.

"Hey, you!" bellowed Ledlie, and his hand swept back, conjuring up steel.

THE young fellow faced about, grabbing at the Colt he had scabbarded. Ledlie fired and dust spurted between the stranger's widespread feet. He dropped the rope and lifted his hands.

Zack, Mace and Bernita swiftly covered the interval to the round pen. Lean, sinewy and sun-scoured, the young man by the gate had a steely eye. Yet he didn't look like a hardened brush-runner.

"Aimin' to steal a bronc, bub?" asked Zack, holding his gun an inch or two from the other's midsection. "You're young for such business."

"You might call it a trade," answered the stranger. "I was goin' to leave my own horse, who's used up. Rustlers on my trail." He turned his head slightly, to shoot a glance up the rise. "There they are, skylined!"

"Take a look, Nita," requested Ledlie.

"It's so, Uncle Zack," she announced. "Five, no, six riders at the top of the slope. Now they're turning back."

"Maybe I can't help myself by explainin'," said the young man, "but I'll do it anyway. I'm Cash Mulhall. Own a little jag of sixty breeders, but what range ain't taken up in Alamo County, where I come from, is poor grazin' and alkali water. With a man to drive my wagon I set out to find a place to settle. Got as far as a gulch, ten miles north of here, without trouble.

"Early this mornin' rustlers jumped us. Finally the teamster and I broke away, headin' for a town we passed yesterday to get the sheriff. Poor old Jerry was shot out of his saddle, but I kept goin'. The money I paid for those cattle was hard earned, Mister. They mean a lot to me, a chance to be a brand owner."

The anger faded from Zack Ledlie's eyes. "Remember when we fought rustlers to get a toehold, Mace?"

Mace grunted, eyeing the young cowman with disfavor. "What'd the rustlers chase you for, Mulhall, if you run out and left the cattle they wanted?"

"I reckon," young Mulhall replied, "because Jerry and I killed two of the gang."

Zack said, "How old are you, son? Twenty? Had a boy of my own about your age. He died of snake bite."

Mace Baxter walked to Mulhall's horse, examined it with care. "This bronc ain't run-down. Hardly sweatin'. Good for another ten miles of hard goin'. It's only three to Lone Cedar and the sheriff."

"I wasn't sure of the distance," said Cash Mulhall, "and the little horse seemed winded. Say, Mister"—he turned to Ledlie—"I feel mighty low about tryin' to borrow a horse without your permission. Don't suppose you'd give me a hand, would you? If we rode right back to the gulch, those waddies couldn't get far with the herd."

Zack nodded and put away his gun. "I'll get a few of my boys together. You goin' along, Mace?"

Baxter said acidly, "I wouldn't miss it for a lot!"

"I'm glad you and Uncle Zack feel that way," remarked Bernita. "I think Mr. Mulhall is deserving of help."

Cash, as he lowered his hands, smiled at her. "Thanks for the good word, miss."

COUNTING three Lazy L cowboys just in from the range, there were six in the party that hammered out the trail to the gulch. Not once did they sight the rustlers who had chased Cash Mulhall, and old Zack expected to find the cattle gone. But the whole sixty head were grazing pacefully on the sloping sides of the gorge.

"If you ask me," said Baxter, with a suspicious look at Mulhall, "they couldn't 'a' wanted the stock very bad."

"Saw us comin' and loped off, I reckon," Cash offered explanation. "We must've been pretty close behind the gang."

"So you and me get cheated out of a fight, Mace," laughed Zack, heading the party into the gulch. "Nice bunch of whitefaces, Cash. Same kind I raise."

Baxter's sharp eyes roved from side to side, noting the condition of the cattle. "And I'd say they ain't been drove far. Alamo County's a hundred miles away. It ought've taken some of the fate off'n 'em. Where's the two waddies you killed, Mulhall? I see a wagon yonder."

Cash, leading them toward the white-tilted ranch wagon, drew rein suddenly and scanned the ground. A few empty cartridge shells were strewn about.

"When Jerry and me broke through," Cash said to Ledlie, "the dead rustlers were layin' here in front of the wagon. Looks as if their pals had carried them off."

Mace Baxter sneered, "You have a glib tongue, kid."

"Let him alone, Mace!" snapped Zack, irritated by his old friend's attitude.

"I wouldn't mind seein' his bill of sale for the cattle," Mace persisted.

"Here it is, then!" Eyes frosty, young Mulhall felt in a pocket. He handed Mace a bill of sale for sixty head of Diamond M whitefaces, dated at a ranch in Alamo County two months previous.

"Might be a forgery," commented Baxter.

Ledlie turned on him wrathfully. "That's enough, Mace! What's got into you?"

"Tryin' to keep you from bein' taken in!" retorted Mace heatedly. "A lot of things don't look right, but you're too dumb to see it."

"When I need a guardeen," fumed Zack, "I'll let you know. Cash, you've got your cattle but nowhere to go. I have a strip of grazin' along Kaw Creek that I don't need. It's yours for as long as you want."

"Kaw Creek!" yelled Mace. "Where my herd gets most of its water!"

"The creek won't run dry," said Zack. "It never has. Though it's on my range, I've always let you use it because your waterholes ain't dependable. You can go on usin' it, Baxter, long as you don't pick on this boy. Otherwise I'll fence it up!"

"Cut me off!" Mace was stunned, deeply affronted by the threat of his old neighbor, which, if carried out, would work extreme hardship on the Circle B. "You string barb wire on Kaw and I'll tear it down!"

"Come with a shootin'-iron in your fist, then!" blared Zack. "You and me, Baxter, have reached a fork in the trail!"

Mace pulled his horse around savagely and galloped down the gulch. An ancient friendship had been broken. Zack gazed grimly after Mace, then said quietly:

"Let's start your herd and the wagon for the creek, Mulhall."

THAT night, on Kaw Creek, with the Diamond M cattle feeding on lush acres, young Mulhall straddled the wagon tongue and stared moodily into the fire. For a year he had followed the owlhoot trail with a youthful enthusiasm for the wild night rides, the game of hide-and

seek with the law. But he didn't like the setup on Windy River range. Not since meeting a girl who had innocently spoken a good word for him and finding out the sort of man he had been hired to dupe.

Catching the faint rataplan of hoofs north of the Kaw, Cash slid off the wagon pole, whisked around back where the firelight wouldn't touch him. He would have bet a blue chip old Mace Baxter was coming to smoke him up. But the horsemen paused on the far shore and the hoot of an owl was borne on the wind. Cash stepped out in plain view, jabbing gun in holster. A loud splashing ensued, and seven riders emerged from the darkness of the creek bank.

"Nobody around, kid?" asked a man with high cheekbones and a stubby black mustache.

"Just me, Buck," replied Cash, looking hard at the lantern-jawed rider beside Buck Mingo. "Ain't you runnin' a risk, Mr. Sneed, to come out here?"

"I was so anxious to know what success you had," said Hank Sneed, land speculator, "that I couldn't wait for you to report in town."

He dismounted to stand by the fire, a tall, ungainly man with restless, sunken eyes. The others followed him to the ground and the horses moved away to crop the bunch grass.

"I made the grade with Ledlie," Cash said, indicating the cattle grazing beyond the fire. "See for yourself. Trouble's already started between him and Baxter over this water. Seems a shame, kind of, to bust up—"

Sneed broke in, sharply, "What d'you mean it's a shame? Those old rannies don't mean nothin' to you."

The drumming of fast-ridden horses drifted up from the south. The sound produced a near-panic among Mulhall's nocturnal visitors.

"Some of the Lazy L outfit, maybe old Zack himself!" exclaimed Sneed. "Spoil everything if they caught us here. Where's my horse?"

Buck Mingo and his five owlhooters, the wild bunch Mulhall had cast his lot with, whirled to look for the mounts. The animals had wandered to the creek, and the outlaws headed for them at an awkward run. Fearful of crossing the lighted area because his lank figure was well-known in the region, Sneed sought the nearest shelter, which happened to be the chuck wagon. As he scrambled over the front seat, he called to Cash:

"Tell Mingo to fetch my bronc here! If I'm recognized, the fat's in the fire!"

Mulhall started to obey, but Mingo and his men were ahorse, spurring for the other side of the Kaw, before he'd taken a half-dozen steps. He turned back to the fire, his mind a ferment. The three riders who dropped rein near the chuck wagon were unfamiliar to Cash. A rawboned fellow in angora chaps spoke.

"You this Mulhall younker Ledlie's taken up with? I'm Pete Quinlan, Zack's foreman. When he told me to get barbed wire and fence up the creek, I was mighty curious to see the hombre who was the cause of his breakin' friendship with Baxter."

"I feel bad about that," Cash said truthfully.

"You do, eh?" Quinlan advanced a couple of paces. "Who was the fellows that just rode north?"

"The rustlers," replied Cash. "I'm glad you happened along to scare 'em off."

Quinlan gave him a doubtful look, faced the wagon and pulled a gun.

"Maybe you didn't see one of 'em duck into this wagon, Mulhall, but we did! And we know the long-eared skunk. Come out of that, Sneed, with your hands up!"

THERE was no response. Cash stood quietly, not of a mind to defend the land speculator. It was his own fault that he had been trapped. Quinlan repeated the order and cramped trigger, the bullet ripping through the canvas cover. On the heels of the shot, Colt-fire split the gloom of the near creek bank. One of Quinlan's companions sagged loosely to the ground. The foreman wheeled toward the point of danger, shouting:

"Look out, Bill! I thought them waddies had gone!"

Bill, the other cowboy, yanked his pistol and squatted, to unleash lead at the jets of gun-flame along the Kaw. Quinlan hunkered at his side, rocking Colt hammer. Mulhall, at the first volley from the creekside, had crouched by a fore wheel of the wagon. His outlaw mates evidently had missed Sneed and returned, knowing that if he fell into the hands of Lazy L men, their scheme would fail. Cash had drawn his .45, torn between loyalty to

the Mingo gang and a sudden desire to throw in with Ledlie's cowhands.

Quinlan, struck twice, staggered to his feet, shouting, "Too many for us, Bill! We can get Sneed later in town!" He lurched toward the mounts, caught the bridle reins of one. Bill rose to follow him. The outlaws, determined neither should escape to bear witness against Sneed, loomed out of the darkness, .45's a-smoke. Quinlan, drilled in the back, missed a grab at the saddle horn and went down under plunging hoofs.

The sight was too much for Mulhall. He opened fire, felled a thickset outlaw whose smoking gun had apparently finished the foreman. Cash caught another in his sights, flipped the hammer. But the diversion didn't save the last Lazy L cowboy. His voice lifted in a stricken yell, then the Colts of the Mingo gang swung on the bent figure by the wagon wheel.

Hank Sneed, observing that the Lazy L hands had been accounted for, jumped from the wagon as a bullet split a wheel spoke at Cash's elbow.

"Don't kill our key man!" Sneed yelled, wildly flapping his arms.

Cash, drawing bead on Mingo, had his aim spoiled when Sneed slammed a boot into him, knocking him sideways. Buck strode up, gun at the ready, profanely demanding to know why Mulhall had tossed a gun on them.

Rising, Cash snarled, "Seein' you pop over those punchers like jackrabbits was the last straw! None of this'd happened if you'd stayed away."

"I admit it," Sneed said, anxious to patch up peace between his outlaw hirelings. "Buck, we just can't work our game without Cash and up to now he's played his cards slick."

"Then," growled Mingo, "he goes haywire and kills two of the boys. Don't look like he can be trusted."

"He didn't mean to double-cross us, not really." Sneed glanced at Cash's sullen face. "That back-shootin' got under his skin. Let's get out of here pronto."

"Leavin' me in a mess," spoke up Cash resentfully. "I can tell Ledlie the cow thieves slaughtered his men, and that's the truth. But I dunno as he'll believe me."

"We'll leave the two you gunned to bolster up your story, since they ain't known around here," said Sneed. "See you in town, Cash."

Mulhall waited for them to ride off, then carried the Lazy L men to the wagon. He put the slain outlaws in beside them, harnessed the wagon team and drove south to Lazy L headquarters. What he told Zack was the truth, as far as it went, and the old cowman thanked him for trying to stop the slaughter. But the Lazy L cowpunchers who were present looked skeptical.

Two days later, a crew of cowboys and a wagon, loaded with fence posts and spools of barbed wire, showed up on Kaw Creek. Cash was ready to pitch in and help with the fence building, but met with rebuff.

"Where's the boss?" Mulhall asked.

"Gone to Lone Cedar," clipped the cowboy in charge. "He's puttin' Sheriff Drannan on the trail of them murderin' rustlers. I wouldn't wonder but it ended here at Kaw Creek."

Cash went off to saddle his horse. He'd as well be riding as hanging around the proddy cowboys. Rising to the saddle, he spied Bernita Baxter, mounted, on the north side of the creek. Mulhall kicked his horse into the stream, splashed across and up the far bank.

BERNITA looked at him through somber eyes. "That fence," she said, "will cause no end of trouble. My father and Uncle Zack are both hasty-tempered. I wish I could bring about renewed harmony, but I'm helpless."

Cash said soberly, "It would have been better if I had kept clear of Windy River range."

"Yes, it would," Bernita quickly agreed, then relented a little. "That seems a hard thing to say when you had no home for yourself or cattle."

Cash winced inwardly. "Too late for me to pull out now. The harm's done."

A horse clip-clopped up in their rear and both turned to meet the blazing eyes of Mace Baxter.

"So," rumbled Mace, "that easy fooled, ex-friend of mine meant what he said about the fence!" He studied the post-digging cowboys a minute. "I don't see Ledlie down there."

"He rode to town," informed Cash.

Baxter scrubbed his chin, scowlin "This fight's between him and me. sense gettin' the hands of either out mixed up in it. I'll go to Lone Cedar m self after lunch, and the two of us'll se the thing in smoke."

"Dad," cried Bernita, ashen-lipped, "you wouldn't throw a gun on Uncle Zack!"

"His fault we split!" barked Mace. "His, and that cub's, there! If Ledlie kills me, he can build his dang fence and keep it up. If I kill him, his ranch won't have no owner and that barb wire'll come down in jig-time." He whirled his horse, calling, "Come along, Nita!"

The girl, despair on her face, was slowly turning her mount when Cash leaned in his saddle, speaking low and earnestly:

"Could you manage to get hold of his six-gun and load 'er with duds?"

Bernita's eyes widened. "I guess I could. Yes, I'm sure."

"Do it, then," urged Mulhall. "I'll ride to town ahead of your old man, find Ledlie and doctor his gun the same way, so they won't kill each other. Later on, maybe we can figure a plan to end this feud."

"Cash Mulhall," the girl said warmly, "you're an ace! I'd never thought of that. Coming, Dad!"

Mulhall recrossed Kaw Creek. When he headed southeast for Lone Cedar, he carried in a chaps pocket six .45 cartridges from which the lead had been removed. Halfway between the Lazy L and town, the trail narrowed between tall cliffs. Without a thought of danger, Cash rode into the defile. The sibilant hiss of a rope startled him. He went flat in the saddle, felt the hemp strike his back and slither off.

A six-gun was in his hand as he twisted round, the horse hammering on at full gallop. Up the rocky cliffside on the right, partly hidden by a boulder, Buck Mingo was wrathfully coiling in his rope. Beside him, the other three owlhooters were reaching for iron.

"Was comin' to even up for the other night, Mulhall," shouted Buck, "when we seen you ridin' this way! Cut loose, boys!"

Apparently the outlaws were more eager for revenge than to share in Sneed's big land grab. But Cash couldn't believe that. He was dispensable since Ledlie and Baxter were at outs, with a water war in the offing. Sneed, reflecting later on Mulhall's gunsmoke opposition to the triple killing, had probably agreed with Mingo they'd better get him before he turned informer. Six-guns crashed on the cliffside. Cash answered, saw the four men sink behind rocks. But he knew he hadn't scored.

He would have given them a fight but dared not risk being delayed or crippled by a shot, perhaps killed. He spurred his leg-stretching horse, soon was out of six-shooter range. When he faced back, the Mingo gang were in the saddle, filing down the cliffside.

CASH beat them into town by a narrow margin. Pulling his mount to a trot on the main street, he passed Hank Sneed's office, with its real estate sign at one side of the door. Sneed, gazing out the window, started, then beckoned to the hard-eyed rider. Mulhall kept going. He looked back once, hearing the sound of hoofbeats. His outlaw mates, following him into Lone Cedar, were pulling up by Sneed's office. He saw them enter the building.

Mulhall had kept a sharp eye out for Zack Ledlie, but the old rancher spied him first, brushing through the swing doors of a saloon. Cash reined over to the curb, spoke rapidly.

"Mace Baxter was down to the creek, and he's r'arin' to meet you in a shoot-out. I don't know as I ought've told him where you were, but—"

"Why not?" broke in Ledlie, his eyes bleak. "He wants to kill me, does he? We'll see! Had your lunch? The Sagebrush Café's right close."

They went into the café. The wall back of the cashier was studded with pegs, hung with customers' sombreros and gunbelts.

"We'd as well check our guns with the hats, boss," said Mulhall, hands on his belt buckle. "More comfortable eatin' without 'em."

"I'll keep mine on," demurred the cowman, "since Baxter may get here shortly."

Cash's face fell as he trailed behind Ledlie to a far table in eye-range of the door. He had intended returning to the cashier's desk before the meal was finished, to replace the good cartridges in Zack's gun with the duds. It was certain now he wouldn't have that chance, and the probable consequences were frightening. Zack would look like a murderer, shooting down Mace with bullets while the latter fired blanks at him. Bernita might think Cash had planned her father's death, tricked her into having a hand in it.

Mulhall stared unseeingly at the menu. He could tell Zack about Baxter's harmless weapon, but the surest way to prevent their clashing was to expose the whole crooked business. He owed nothing to Sneed and the Mingo gang. Yet he hated for Bernita and Zack to know him as he really was.

"Boss," said Mulhall abruptly, "as I was comin' into town, I saw the four rustlers who got away the other night. They went into Sneed's real estate office."

Zack's eyes popped; he smote the table with both fists. "Those killers! Did they see you? We'll get the sheriff and take 'em by surprise!"

He made for the door, Mulhall keeping up with long strides. They found Sheriff Drannan at the jail. The peace officer grabbed his hat, not waiting to get warrants. Four horses still switched flies in front of Sneed's office and Sheriff Drannan palmed the doorknob, went in first with his gun bared. The five men seated in the tobacco-hazed room started to their feet.

"Mulhall," said the sheriff, "do you identify these four fellows as part of the gang that downed the Lazy L boys?"

"Yes," said Cash, coolly meeting the glaring eyes focused on him.

"You keep strange company, Sneed," commented Drannan. "How come?"

Standing behind his desk, the land speculator replied, "I don't know them. They just dropped in to ask about some homestead land—"

"Stop lyin'!" Mingo cut in fiercely. "If we're caught, so are you and that double-crossin' kid, unless he's made a deal to save his skin!"

Before Sneed could frame an answer, a horse clattered up to the front window and Mace Baxter's shrill voice penetrated to the office.

"I seen you and Mulhall duck in there, Ledlie! You know why I'm lookin' for you. Come out here!"

ZACK turned quickly to the door. Cash shouted, "Wait!" and sprang after him. But Ledile, paying no heed, gained the sidewalk. Baxter was dismounting in the street as Mulhall came through the door behind Zack.

"Shoot when you're ready!" hollered old Mace, right hand spread clawlike above his gunstock.

"Figure to stop me from fencin' my own water, do you?" Ledlie roared back. As he stepped from the sidewalk into the street, hand dropping beltward, Cash seized his arm. He bent it backward and wrested the pistol from clinging fingers. The oldster swung round with an oath.

"What you doin', Cash? Gimme that gun!"

Mulhall moved away from him, his gaze fixed on Mace Baxter. The latter, staring in surprise, cried:

"Suits me if you want to do the old he-wolf's fightin' for him! You're the cause of this trouble, Mulhall!"

Baxter whisked gun from leather. As the report crashed out, Cash stood firm. Ledlie's .45 lowered against his leg. Mace fired again, pointblank. When Cash didn't fall, showed no trace of a wound, a puzzled expression crossed Baxter's seamed face. He aimed his gun at the ground and pulled trigger. An explosion followed, but no bullet kicked up the dust.

"Somebody's been tinkerin' with my shootin'-iron!" he snorted, throwing out the cylinder to spill the leadless brass shells into his left hand. "Why, they're all blanks!"

Sudden uproar in Sneed's office, the banging of Colts, spun Cash Mulhall to the rightabout. A heavy chair crashed through the front window. Close behind it Mingo appeared, his Colt wreathing smoke. As he cleared the jagged aperture, he yelled at Mulhall:

"Here's your needin's, kid!"

Cash felt a slug fan his cheek. He pitched up Ledlie's .45. Mingo flopped on his knees, stretched out. The rustler who followed Mingo seemed to trip as he struck the sidewalk. He went down on his face, made no outcry when the next man, hurtling outward with gun aflame, landed in the middle of his back, legs turning rubbery. Cash had drawn his own gun, was blazing away two-handed.

The fourth dived headlong through the shattered pane. Two shots whipped over him. The bodies sprawled in front of the window cushioned his fall. He scrambled up, drilling a hole in Cash's loosely hanging vest. Cash downed him on the run.

"Hey!" yelled the sheriff. "If it's all over out there, give me a hand."

Cash and old Zack strode to the office door and looked in. Drannan sat on the floor, his Colt covering Sneed, whose hands were raised.

"Put the cuffs on him, Ledlie," sai

the sheriff, tossing out a pair of steel bracelets. "I can't stand. They all turned on me when you and the kid ran out. Ain't sure what Sneed's been up to, but I reckon Mulhall knows."

Ledlie handcuffed the cringing land speculator, looked from him to Cash and asked:

"Well, which of you is goin' to tell?"

"I will," said Cash grimly. "Sneed wanted your ranch and Baxter's, to split up into homestead quarter sections and sell to the highest bidders. He couldn't buy either of you out, so he hired the Mingo gang. Knowin' you had never got over the loss of your son, he thought I was a good bet for workin' on your sympathy, posin' as a homeless cowboy. Soon as everything was settled, I was to start trouble, shootin' trouble, between you and Baxter. With both of you dead, gettin' the land wouldn't be so hard.

"We stole those whitefaces from you, rebranded 'em. The bill of sale, of course, was a fake. But after meetin' you and Miss Baxter, I didn't feel like goin' through with it."

Ledlie had listened in stunned silence. "So old Mace was right, after all, in suspectin' you." He turned savagely on Sneed. "I ought to bash in your skull for plannin' this!"

"Before you do," spoke a voice from the door, "I'd like to know who loaded my gun with duds?"

All eyes turned on Mace Baxter. Bernita suddenly appeared beside him in the doorway.

"I changed the loads, Dad," she said, "but it was Cash's idea. He was to do the same with Uncle Zack's gun. Didn't want you two to harm each other. Outlaw or no outlaw, that speaks well for Cash Mulhall."

She smiled at Cash. Even Mace looked at him kindly. Cash's eyes shifted to Zack. The Lazy L boss came and put a hand on his shoulder. "If either Mace or I had been killed, the survivor would have regretted it to the end of his days. We owe you a debt of gratitude."

"I'll say we do," Mace stepped forward. "Here's my hand, Zack. Sort of a forty-five reunion, ain't it?"

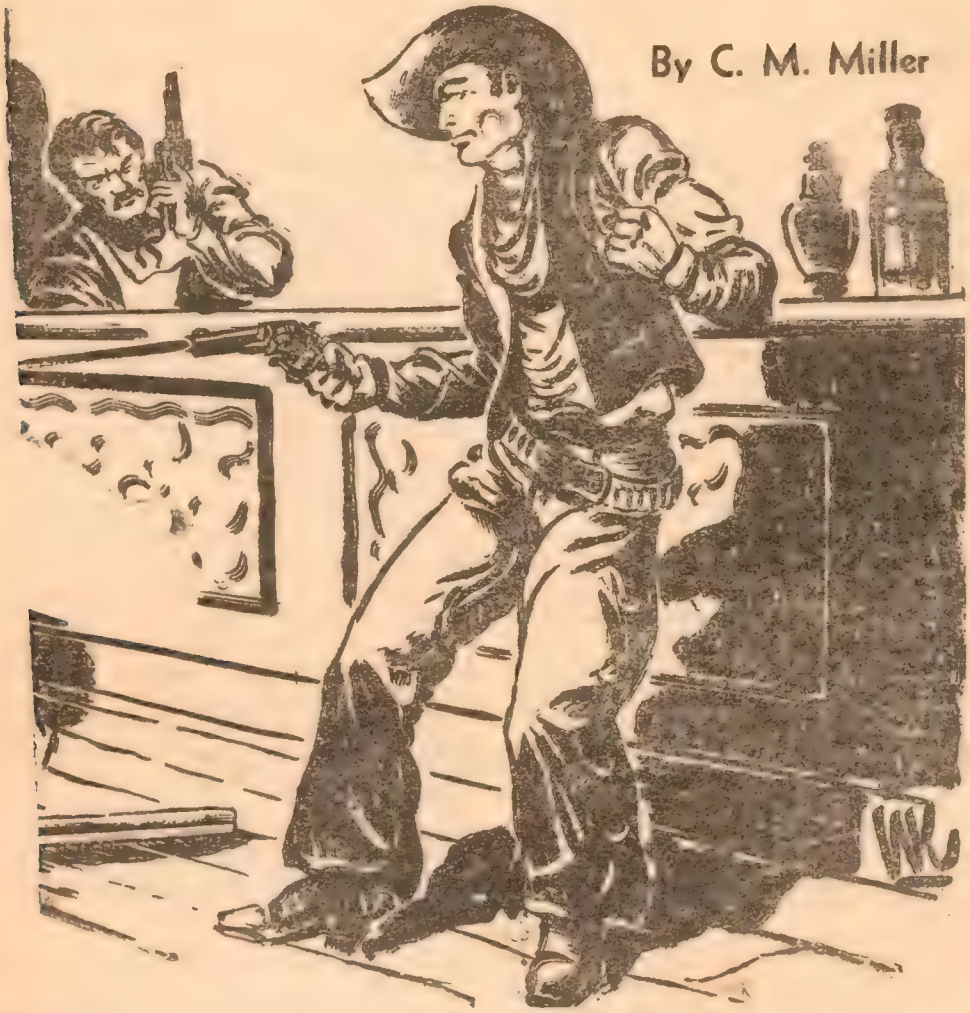
They shook warmly, while Bernita beamed from the doorway.

"Don't you want me to arrest Mulhall for his part in the deal?" asked Sheriff Drannan.

Zack turned on him sharply. "Certainly not! This boy's goin' back to the Lazy L and help me raise whitefaces like young Jeff would've done had he lived."

# Shadows from the Owlhoot

By C. M. Miller



*Jim Renton couldn't figure out why that old swamper had always sided him. But when Jim became mixed up in a cow-town killing and the oldster took the bullet blame, Jim had to delve into an owlhoot past to save them both from a .45 future.*

THE bucket of cold water hit Jim Renton squarely in the face. It made him gasp. Then he rolled over and sat up. For a moment his head ached and whirled until the dim light at the end of the alley seemed to go round and round.

Then slowly it settled down and he saw the dead man sprawled on his face not three feet away.

"It's Si Welch, Jim," a low voice at Jim's back said, "He's shot plumb through the head."

Jim looked up. The alley was pitch

black, but there was enough light from the stars for him to recognize the man. It was the bent, gray-haired, gnarled old man who swamped out the Jingo. Who he was and where he came from no one in Rainbow knew. He just drifted into town and took over the job. Everybody called him Swamp.

"Here's your gun, Jim," Old Swamp said and handed Jim his six-shooter. "I took the empty cartridge out of it and put in a fresh one from your belt. Now you better get out of here before Sam Wharton comes down for his after-supper drink. It's 'most time for him right now."

Jim felt the aching knot on his head, then got to his feet, standing on rubbery legs. "What do you mean, you took the cartridge out of my gun?"

"I was just tryin' to help you out," Old Swamp explained. "You always been decent to me, Jim. 'Bout the only man in town that is," he added bitterly. "I come out the back door there a minute ago and found you had finally killed Si—" He spread his gnarled hands in a helpless gesture. "I was just trying to help you out."

"What are you talking about?" Jim said sharply. "I didn't kill Si. I know we've been having a lot of trouble over some range rights, but I didn't kill him."

"Now," Old Swamp interrupted, "I ain't going to tell on you. You jest hike out of here and let 'em find Si layin' there. Nobody will know. They didn't even hear the shot."

"But I tell you I didn't kill him!" Jim protested. "The last thing I remember I was walking past the alley—and zowie! I wake up here."

FROM the half-cracked door at Jim's elbow came the sound of the evening drinkers at the bar in the Jingo, the smell of smoke and sour whisky.

Then a hearty voice said, "My usual, bartender. Where is Si Welch? I thought I saw him around a while ago."

Old Swamp gave Jim a shove toward the end of the alley. "You better get going fast," he whispered hoarsely. "That's Sheriff Wharton in for his after-supper drink."

But Jim Renton wanted to get this straight. He had been found in a black alley with a dead man he hated sprawled at his feet, a lump on his own head, and a dead cartridge in his six-shooter.

"Maybe Si went out back," Sheriff Sam Wharton's booming voice came through the cracked door again. "I think I'll take a look."

Heavy boots started that way and Swamp gave Jim another hard shove. "Run, you fool!" he whispered. "Sam Wharton hates your guts. He'll hang you!"

Still Jim held back. "What about you?"

"I'm all right," Swamp whispered. Those boots were mighty close. "I work here. Git, kid—and make it fast!"

Jim ran down the alley. But instead of rounding the corner, he ducked behind a rain barrel a few doors away and waited.

Sam Wharton, big, hard, overbearing, came through the saloon door. He saw Si Welch sprawled there with Old Swamp standing over him, and stopped quick.

"What the hell goes on here?" he roared, then bent and rolled Si on his back. "Good Lord, it's Si Welch! Swamp, who did this?"

Old Swamp stood there trembling for a moment, his gnarled hands picking at his pants leg, then he said, "I—I killed him. He called me a name I wouldn't take."

"You're a liar!" Sam Wharton bellowed. "You ain't got the guts to kill a fly. Where's the gun?"

Swamp looked helplessly around, then pointed to a dark space between two buildings across the alley. "I flung it in there."

Sam Wharton crossed the alley and went into the slot. From where he crouched, Jim Renton could see Sam striking matches, looking around.

A CROWD had come from inside the saloon by now. They stood around Si and cast queer glances at Old Swamp who seemed entirely oblivious of them. Someone had brought a lantern.

But now a dozen unanswered questions were whirling around inside Jim Renton's head. Old Swamp must be crazy.

Sam came back from inside the slot. "There's no gun in there. Swamp, you're lyin' like hell."

"I ain't lying," Swamp said earnestly. "Si called me a name and—"

"I know," Sam finished wearily. "You killed him. But you didn't have a gun and you didn't have the guts."

Jim Renton saw the way things were headed for Old Swamp and he had no

intention of letting an innocent man hang for a killing like that. He went over.

"Swamp didn't kill this man, Sam," he said. "I—"

Sam Wharton whirled. "Oh, it's you," he said sourly. "I've been wondering how long it would be before you got mixed up in a killing or something. What do you know about this? You and Si have had plenty of trouble."

Jim Renton told the story truthfully. He even showed them the lump on his head. "Old Swamp didn't do this," he said earnestly. "It was somebody who stood to gain from Si's death."

"And you're the man!" Sam Wharton snapped triumphantly. "Maybe the rest of you boys didn't know this, but Jim Renton is Denver Mike Renton's kid. I recognized him the moment I saw him."

"Not the Denver Mike that rode owlhoot!" somebody said, a little awed.

"The very same!" Wharton rumbled. "He helped hold up a Phoenix bank and got away with thirty thousand dollars. Right after that he was killed by a lawman. Jim Renton is his son, and now he's tangled up with a murder."

"You're just a damn, bullheaded liar!" Jim Renton said hoarsely. "Denver Mike was my father, sure. I admit it! But that has nothing to do with the case."

"Blood tells," Sam Wharton snapped righteously.

Old Swamp put in his tremulous word. "But I tell you *I* killed Si!"

"I'll settle this thing," Sam Wharton boomed. "I'll lock you both up and damned if I won't have a double hanging."

"You nor no one else is locking me up for something I didn't do," Jim Renton said evenly.

"The hell I won't!" Sam Wharton roared, and started for Jim.

But before he had taken one full step Jim Renton stepped in close and sank his fist to the wrist in Sam's stomach. Sam let out a grunt and half doubled. Then Jim swung an uppercut. He brought that one from his boot tops and he put everything he had in it.

SAM WHARTON straightened suddenly, then went down with his head pillowed on Si Welch's knee. Before the rest of the crowd could move, Jim Renton had them covered and was backing down the alley, pulling Old Swamp after him.

When he rode into Rainbow, Jim had left his horse just down the street. After hitting the end of the alley he headed for it at a run, Old Swamp panting after him. Boosting Swamp up behind the saddle, Jim mounted and headed out of town at a run.

"You can't get away with this," Swamp protested shrilly. "This horse can't carry double and they'll be after us."

"We'll lose 'em in the dark," Jim answered. "By daylight I'll have you a horse and rig. After that, I don't know."

"So you're Denver Mike Renton's kid," Old Swamp said. "He was a pretty mean skunk to have a nice kid like you. I heard about his killing in that Phoenix holdup. Shot with a scattergun, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Jim said bitterly. "By a bounty hunter. He hid in the willows along the Colorado River and shot Dad and his saddle pardner from ambush. The bounty hunter got Dad's saddle pardner, but Dad fell into the river and was washed over a falls onto the rocks.

"They found his body a couple of weeks later and buried him. I've been on my own all my life. Don't know who my mother was. Never saw Denver Mike but once and all I remember about him was a big black mustache. But that's something else. Why did you confess to Si Welch's killing?"

"Well—I thought," Old Swamp began lamely, "I—you been mighty decent to me since I come here and—and you're just a young buck gettin' along nice. I—I didn't want to see you hung, so I—"

"So you still think I killed Si Welch."

"You been having plenty of trouble with Si."

"Sure. But I didn't kill him—on the word of Denver Mike Renton's kid, I don't know who did it."

Old Swamp sucked in a deep br[illegible] and let it out slowly. "I don't either," [illegible] admitted.

"Well, we certainly got ourselves into a sweet jackpot over somebody else's doings," Jim Renton said dryly. "And our only out is to find who did kill Si, and why." Then he added grimly, "I'd like to know how I got there in that alley, too."

There were sounds of a posse on their back trail. Jim swung the big dun into a clump of trees. In a moment the posse rode past, heading on down the road.

"On their way to your place," Swamp said. "Best place for us is where the

ain't lookin'—back in town. Take me to my place. I got a idea."

OLD SWAMP lived in a neat little two-room shack at the edge of town. It was dark when they left the dun out back and went inside. Swamp struck a light and dragged an ancient trunk from under the bed.

"Kept all my old duds here," he explained as he began dragging out worn boots, a pair of levis, a flannel shirt and two six-guns. "Somehow I got a hunch I'll need this stuff."

He pulled on the clothes, and somehow, as Jim Renton watched Old Swamp don those duds, he seemed to see the man change under his very eyes. The wrinkles were still in Swamp's face and the gray in his hair, but his shoulders had straightened; his eyes were sharp and alert now. He looked like a different person.

Snapping a six-shooter from its holster he gave it a twirl on his finger. Expertly, he caught the butt in his palm with the hammer flicked back and the sights dead on Jim's heart.

"I wasn't always a swamper," he said. "And don't you believe—"

He bit the words off short, and snuffed out the lamp. For from outside had come the stealthy sound of a man slipping along the side of the house.

Jim Renton and Old Swamp stood there in the center of the room, holding their breaths. With every muscle drawn to string tightness, they listened.

The man was creeping along near the window. They could hear his boots in the gravel. He stopped there a moment, then moved on. At the front door came the nd of more boots. Then the two men For a moment they stood there ering, then a stealthy hand tried door.

It swung open easily, squeaking a little on its hinges, to reveal them silhouetted gainst the faint starlight. Jim Renton elt Old Swamp's hand on his gun wrist, heard Swamp's faint whisper:

"Let 'em inside and get 'em. They're ot here for fun."

The two men were inside the room now. One fumbled for a match. At that moment Jim Renton and Old Swamp sprang. Jim Renton took the man nearest him and they went down in a rolling, tumbling eap. He smashed at the man's head with 's gun barrel, but the man hit Jim Renton's arm with his own gun. The blow numbed Jim's wrist, sending his gun clattering across the floor.

Old Swamp and his man had gone to the floor, overturning a chair and rolling clear across the room. Now Jim could hear them by the stove, panting, cursing as they fought.

Jim Renton got in one good swing at the face under him. The man groaned and Jim swung again—hard. As the man went limp, Jim kicked free and got to his feet.

Just then a six-shooter blasted from the tangle in the corner. Again there was a shot, then a gurgling rasp, and somebody was climbing to his feet.

JIM'S fingers shook as he fumbled out a match and got a light. Old Swamp, his face battered and a trickle of blood streaming from one corner of his mouth, was standing there, his gun on Jim.

"Good thing you got that light going, son," he panted, "or I might have shot you. Light the lamp while I cover these windows, then we'll see what we caught."

The man Old Swamp had jumped was dead. "He pulled a knife on me," Swamp said, and his face was suddenly deathly pale. He staggered to a chair and sat down mopping sweat and blood from his face.

"You look like you'd seen a ghost," Jim said.

"I—have," Old Swamp managed, his staring eyes on the dead man in the corner. "I—I have."

Jim took another look at the dead man. About fifty, the man was short, heavy-set, with a long scar down one cheek. He was a stranger to Jim.

"You know him, Swamp?"

Old Swamp jumped as if he were shot. "Sure," he said. "It's—" Then he stopped quickly. "No—no, son, I don't know him," he said grimly, but Jim Renton knew he was lying. He also knew there was no sense trying to make Swamp talk when he didn't want to.

The other man was coming to now. Jim jerked him to his feet and plunked him into a chair. He was dark, with black eyes that glittered like black diamonds. He, too, was a stranger to Jim. Old Swamp, if he knew the man, did not say so. He was about thirty.

"What the hell do you mean bustin'

into a man's house like this?" Jim Renton demanded.

"I reckon any man who is on the dodge for murder is fair game for anybody," the man snarled. "What you figure on doin' now, kill me?"

"I don't kill," Jim said grimly, "unless I have to. And I'm not on the dodge for murder. I didn't kill anyone."

"Then why has Sam Wharton offered two hundred and fifty dollars reward for you and Old Swamp alive? And why is he out hunting you with a posse right now?"

"Lemme handle this, Jim." Old Swamp stepped in front of the man. "Where did you learn that about the reward, and for us alive."

"I get around," the man said.

"You're a liar," Old Swamp snapped. "You ain't been in Rainbow before tonight or I'd have seen you. You know Sam Wharton, but you ain't never been in the Jingo when he was in for his after supper drink. Now come clean, Mister, or I'll peel your ears off."

"Ask him," the man said, and nodded toward the dead man. "He knows all the story. I was just hired to come along."

"And do some of the gun work, I suppose," Old Swamp said sourly. "How long have you two been hiding out around here?"

"A month."

"I thought so. And meetin' Sam Wharton every night, I bet. What was talked about?"

But the black-eyed man just shook his head. "I was just hired to come along," he said stubbornly. "I wouldn't know."

"I would," Old Swamp said grimly.

"You would what?" Jim Renton put in. "After all, *I'm* the man they claim killed Si Welch, and who got knocked on the head, and damned if I don't seem to know less about it than anyone else around here. Who is that dead man in the corner, Swamp?"

SUDDENLY Old Swamp looked like a man who was backed into a corner and was having the heart ripped out of him. Sweat stood out on his face, and his red tongue darted across his lips as if they were fever dry.

"Yes, I know him, Jim," he managed, his voice a half croak. "I know him too damned well and I know this—never as long as there's a breath in my body will I tell you who he is, nor why he is here."

He wiped sweat off his face with a long-fingered hand that shook. "I know who killed Si Welch now and I know why, but I'm not telling you."

"Listen," Jim Renton said desperately. "*I'm* the man—"

"I know," Old Swamp broke in, "but let me finish. Please, Jim. Remember, I tried to help you. I'm trying to help you now, too—and I will if you'll just trust me. I know what is back of all this dirty business. I'll put a stop to it—if you'll let me do it—in my own way. Will you, fellow? Will you—please?"

Old Swamp was pleading then—pleading with his entire soul and body. There were even tears in his eyes as he put a hand on Jim Renton's arm and looked into his face.

Jim swallowed hard. There was something about this kindly old man's manner that got under his skin. Something—well, damn it, something he liked. Still he protested.

"But, Swamp, it ain't right for you to go out and do my dirty work."

Swamp managed a weak grin. "You don't savvy, Jim," he said. "You forget *I'm* in this too—up to my neck. I can clear up everything, if you'll let me. I can do it easy."

"All right," Jim agreed. "If that's the way it's got to be, that's the way it will have to be. But I don't savvy."

"It don't make no difference," Old Swamp said. "Just as long as it's straight."

He got a rope and tied the black-eyed man tight to the chair, then he cooked up a meal and put it on the table.

"Eat hearty, Jim. It's most daylight now. Sam Wharton won't be around t' tonight. He's funny that way."

All that day the three of them stayed in that one room, eating, smoking, thinking. Old Swamp seemed lost in thought. At last he jumped up and dragged that old trunk from under the bed. From its darkest corner he took something and tucked it into his pocket, then he said:

"If I shouldn't come back, Jim, take the things out of this trunk and head for the timber. When you're well hid, see what you got."

All this time the black-eyed man watched Old Swamp with a half-twisted grin on his face. It was as if he knew what was coming but not exactly why.

IT WAS just after dark when Swamp got his hat and started for the door. "I'll settle it now, Jim," he said. "Don't forget what I said about that trunk. But don't look into it till you're sure I'm not coming back."

He went out, closing the door softly after him, leaving a very puzzled Jim Renton behind.

Maybe fifteen minutes had passed when the black-eyed man spoke up. "You might as well clean out that trunk and hike, Jim Renton. Swamp won't be back."

"What do you mean?" Jim Renton snapped. "You know more than you been saying, feller. Spill it, or by hell, I'll—"

The man grinned. "I don't know any more than you do, but I've been using my bean. And I got ears."

"I've got ears too," Jim admitted, "and I've been trying to use my bean, but I'm all mixed up."

"Don't you see what time it is?"

Jim looked at the clock on the shelf above the stove. "Five minutes to seven," he said, "but what—"

"Come hell or high water," the black-eyed man said, "Sam Wharton has his after-supper whisky at just seven o'clock. He will be at the Jingo in five minutes. Swamp will beat him there. He's expecting Sam alone—but he won't be alone. There were four of us hiding out there in the hills. Two of those men will be with Sam Wharton.

"Me and him"—he nodded toward the corner—"come here just in case you two doubled back. But Sam and the others took to the country after you. Old Swamp don't know it, but he's gone to his funeral."

"Then it's going to be a double funeral!" Jim Renton rapped as he grabbed up his hat and made for the door.

In two long jumps he was out in the street and headed for the Jingo on the run. He hit the alley back of the saloon, ducked into the black shadows, and made the back door. It was unlocked. He eased it open and slipped inside.

Ahead, down a hall, was another door, a crack of light seeping under its bottom. Dead silence from behind it. Jim eased the door open the least bit and glued his eye to the crack. The Jingo was empty, but there was the sound of the bartender moving about. He could not see the man from where he was.

Just then the batwings swished open and Sam Wharton came in. At his heels were two slim, dark men with six-guns thonged to their thighs. Sam was talking to them over his shoulder as he walked to the bar. Then Swamp's voice said calmly:

"What will it be, gents?"

SAM WHARTON'S big head came around with a jerk, and Jim Renton eased the door wider so he could see the bar. Old Swamp was standing there behind it, both hands on the bar. But on his upper lip was a big black mustache!

"Denver Mike Renton!" Sam Wharton gasped. "Where the hell—"

"Oh, don't act so surprised," Old Swamp said coolly. "You recognized me a month ago, Sam, you damned bounty hunter." Swamp's voice was like ice now. "You didn't kill me, Sam. I lived after I went over them falls. It was a sheepherder they buried in my place.

"And don't look for the bartender. I stuck him in the back room so I could give you your last dose of poison—for tryin' to frame my kid."

Jim Renton's head was awhirl then. This was Denver Mike Renton, his father! The man he thought was dead! He had taken that false mustache from his trunk, was wearing it because Jim had said it was the only thing he remembered about his dad. But Denver Mike was still talking.

"You been trying to find that Phoenix bank money for years, Sam. There was thirty thousand dollars and you figured it was a good Argentine stake. You suspected that might have been a sheepherder that was buried in my place and you been watching my kid.

"Then I come to town to see him, but I'm ashamed to tell him who I am. You recognize me. But you knowed damn well I wouldn't talk about old times or give you a tumble, for fear my kid would find it out. I got my pride, Sam. You knowed if you told who I was I would kill you."

Sam Wharton's big hands were gripping the bar edge until the knuckles were bone white. Sweat stood out on his face in cold, glistening beads. The two gunnies flanked him, their hands close to their guns as they waited their cue to go into action.

And Jim Renton held his breath tight in a pair of lungs that ached, but that he could scarcely feel.

"You tried a trick, Sam," Old Swamp was saying. "You knew my kid and Si Welch were having trouble. You killed Si, then knocked Jim on the head and put him there by Si, figuring on framing him for murder. Then you'd make a deal with me. If I'd tell you where that money was hid you'd let the kid loose. I caught onto it last night, Sam. When I killed Bill Stamp, your old saddle pard, I remembered you two had pulled the same trick in Tucson.

"Well, Sam, I gave the money back to the bank when I decided to go straight. And now I got your ticket to hell before you tell the kid! Pull your gun, Sam, and let's get it over with."

THERE was no signal to start it. Denver Mike's hands disappeared behind the bar and came up with two six-shooters, a fraction of a second before the ones across the mahogany started shooting.

Denver Mike's first bullet hit one of the gunnies. The slug smashed him back from the bar, sending him squirming to the floor. A bullet hit Denver Mike then. He tipped backwards. The gun in his right hand flipped up and smashed the back bar mirror into a million tiny pieces.

"That got him!" Sam Wharton bellowed triumphantly. "That got him!"

His gun was just flipping down for the kill when Jim Renton jumped into the room. "But it didn't get me!" he shouted, and shot.

The other gunny grabbed his side and went sliding along the bar as his knees gave under him. And Sam Wharton spun, sending the bullet he had aimed at Denver Mike at Jim Renton. Jim grunted as the slug raked his hip and took a piece out of his holster. Then he shot Sam Wharton. The bullet took the big roaring-voiced sheriff squarely in the heart. He had just barely time to gasp before he died.

Denver Mike, holding his bleeding right arm with his good left hand, came around the bar. He had lost the big black mustache.

"How long have you been here, Jim Renton?" he demanded, and there was none of the shrillness of age about him now. He was Denver Mike, the man who had once had half the sheriffs in Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada on his trail. "How much did you hear?"

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"All of it," Jim Renton said simply. "Every damned word of it, and I'm proud to call Denver Mike my dad. Damned proud!"

Denver Mike blinked hard. "You—you mean that?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I hadn't," Jim Renton answered soberly. "When you gave back that Phoenix bank money I figure you earned your pardon—from me. You got it."

Denver Mike swallowed hard. "It's good to hear you say that," he managed stiffly. "Let's go home—to the Circle R. We'll make that damn place pay a heap better than the owlhoot trails, won't we—son?"

"We sure will—Dad. But first we'll pick up the trunk. I want those old letters from Mother and her picture. I saw them when you lifted the lid to get that false mustache you used to wear when you were on the dodge."

Denver Mike chuckled. "Why you son-of-a-gun! I believe you knew who I was all the time."

Jim grinned. "Nope. I've just been trying to use my eyes and ears."

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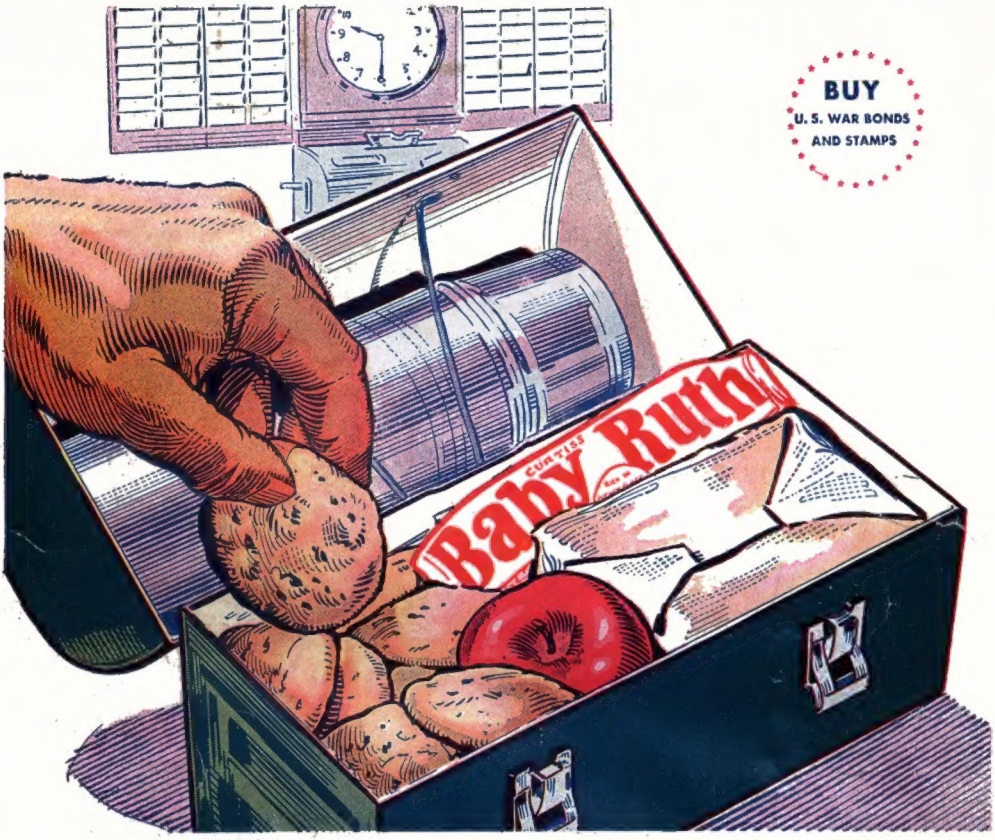


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